

# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.*



## THE CHANGING POLITICS OF ABORTION

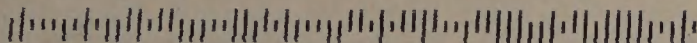


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# CHURCH IN THE MAKING

"Being church together as older and younger Christians makes us aware of our differing opinions, needs, and viewpoints.

"The problem arises when we don't understand that the dominant culture reflects a particular generation. We confuse prevalence with sacredness. The distinctions become more acute as we close some churches and plant new ones.

"We should remember that the churches planted today also reflect a particular culture. The key will be to celebrate and support differences and interpret them for one another."



"Carol Howard Merritt has a welcome (if unsettling) clarity about where the church is now as well as an inspired vision of where it ought to be."

—Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, executive religion editor of the *Huffington Post*

Carol Howard Merritt writes *Church in the Making* for the *Christian Century*.

THE  
Christian  
CENTURY



# Editor's DESK

by John M. Buchanan

## Reason for hope

A FRIEND OF MINE recently announced that he had lost hope for the human race. The news each day was so consistently and relentlessly depressing, he said, that he was certain that the human project had run its course. We might flail about for a few more centuries, but the end of civilization was in sight.

A study published in *Science* magazine last summer announced that global warming is approaching a tipping point after which no reversal will be possible. Marine life will perish, more and more species will become extinct, coastal areas will flood regularly, and there will be more violent weather more often.

Meanwhile ISIS has released a video showing its militants destroying priceless historical artifacts in the Mosul Museum in northern Iraq. This act of cultural genocide reminds me of reports of the sack of Rome in 410 CE. In *The Sack of Rome*, a painting by Joseph-Noël Sylvestre, two naked Visigoth warriors are climbing a Roman statue and placing a rope around its neck in order to pull it to the ground and destroy it. St. Jerome wrote, "If Rome can perish, what can be safe?"

My analogy may be as hyperbolic as my friend's announce-

ment. Yet there are days when I find myself thinking a lot about his conclusion that there is no hope.

Thank God that Lent is about to become Holy Week and Good Friday and Easter. Once again we'll rehearse the drama we know so well. Peaceful kindness and gracious compassion will again confront the world of power and violent authority. We will again remember that Jesus confronted the political, economic, and social authorities and that in five short days he was arrested and executed.

And yet Easter comes. We believe that although bullies, thugs, and murderers seem to be winning, peace and justice will prevail at the end of the day. We dare to believe that the long arc of history, as Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, is toward freedom, equality, kindness, justice, and love.

We become fools for Christ because Jesus was still loving and forgiving even as men were driving nails through his wrists and ankles. Because of Easter we dare to believe that the resurrection drama points to God's ultimate authority and power. Death did not defeat Jesus. The power of empire, human hatred, cruelty, and bigotry did not prevail on that dark Friday because three days later, there was Easter.

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Cover photo © AP Photo / Pablo Martinez Monsivais



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The CHRISTIAN CENTURY, (ISSN 0009-5281) is published biweekly at 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago IL 60603. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Product (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 1406523. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHRISTIAN CENTURY, P.O. Box 429, Congers NY 10920-0429.





## New Christian communities

**I** was so glad to read about the efforts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to create new congregations (“Shut up and learn,” by Carol Howard Merritt, March 4). It’s not about using flyers, door hangers, or newspaper inserts to help people learn about Jesus. That’s marketing, and it is needed. But more needed are relationships, earning the right to be heard, and having the boldness to share the hope we have in Jesus Christ. The focus needs to be on the ways we all have to informally share the love of God in Christ.

*Sharon Borden Rogers*  
*christiancentury.org comment*

**I**t’s no coincidence that 87 percent of new multisite church starts are led by someone from within an existing congregation. Planting cultures is much easier than taking individuals out of context, processing them through an academy on a coast, and hoping they can connect culturally when sent to the middle of the continent.

*Eric Peltz*  
*christiancentury.org comment*

**I** hope that leaders of the so-called mainline denominations take this story to heart and realize that outward-focused campus ministries have provided this kind of laboratory of ministry exploration for generations—ministries that denominational leaders have allowed, in all too many recent cases, to starve to death.

*David Jones*  
*christiancentury.org comment*

### High-priced calling . . .

**I**nstead of starting with ideas for giving M.Div. students more economi-

cally viable skills, how about devoting those resources to developing theological literacy and integration among laity (“Paying for seminary,” by Sharon Miller and Christian Scharen, Feb. 18)?

Instead of training M.Div. students in counseling skills, how about helping therapists, social workers, business managers, and counselors acquire knowledge and skills in theological reflection so they can more intentionally integrate their faith and work in their frontline roles in societal transformation?

*Judith Miller*  
*christiancentury.org comment*

### What love can’t fix . . .

**O**n my understanding of love in the New Testament, Matt Gaventa’s story about his response to his father’s depression (“What love can’t fix,” Feb. 4) illustrates not the failure or the limits of love but rather its very essence and embodiment: taking the practical and necessary steps—medical interventions in the form of in-patient acute care and drug treatment in addition to loving, personal presence—to facilitate the return to wholeness and new life.

*Steve Churchill*  
*Oakland, Calif.*

### Nonanxious presence . . .

**W**as Dietrich Bonhoeffer 50 years ahead of Edwin Friedman in his theory of youth ministry (“Young life together,” by Andrew Root, Feb. 18)? There seems to be a significant parallel between Bonhoeffer’s “remain calm and composed and share personal experience” and Friedman’s notion that “self-differentiation, staying connected,

and dealing with sabotage” are keys to leadership.

As Root describes, Bonhoeffer did not pick up Pastor Maller’s chronic and acute anxiety over the unruly class of boys. Instead he focused on developing a relationship with them that was more important than the task of teaching the catechism. He was nonanxious and non-emotionally reactive to their unruly sabotage while being thoughtful about sharing who Jesus Christ was to him. He stayed connected to them by both developing a “place-sharing” relationship and dealing creatively with their sabotage.

*Herman Green*  
*Rockport, Tex.*

### Searching with Merton . . .

**I** too believe that Thomas Merton would not have left the monastery—he would have returned to it (“A letter to Thomas Merton,” by Carol Zaleski, Jan. 21). He loved God, he loved the monastic life, and he loved people. He was always searching for God, responding to that desire that God has placed in all of us.

Brother Patrick Hart said that Merton will never be made a saint because he was too honest. I believe he is a saint.

Merton was a great evangelizer. Through his writing, his life experience and his honesty about that experience, his witness as a religious man, his embracing of all humanity, Merton invited countless souls to find their way back to God. It is Merton who inspired me to become a Catholic deacon and a Missionary of Charity coworker. He still inspires many.

*Brian Murphy*  
*christiancentury.org comment*



April 1, 2015

## Still targeted

One has to go out of one's way in Denmark to find a synagogue to terrorize—the country has only a few thousand Jews. And one has to go out of one's way in France to find a kosher market to attack.

The terrorizing of the grocery in east Paris, where Amedy Coulibaly killed four people in January, all of them Jews, was not a “random” act of violence, as President Obama oddly suggested. Nor was the February shooting of Dan Uzan outside a Copenhagen synagogue. Nor was there randomness last year in the killing of four people at a Jewish museum in Brussels or in the murder of a rabbi and three children at a Jewish school in Toulouse. A vicious anti-Semitism persists on the streets of Europe as well as in the Middle East and on the Internet.

Is anti-Semitism on the rise, as many claim? Anti-Semitic crimes and attitudes are hard to quantify, and data vary from region to region. Attitudes of the general population may become more benign while violence perpetrated by a hard-core minority increases. Some studies show that the number of anti-Semitic incidents declined in parts of Europe in the decade before 2013 but has shot up of late. In the United States, home to 70 percent of the world's Jews, the number of anti-Semitic incidents has held steady or declined in recent years.

Opposition to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian West Bank goes hand in hand with much anti-Semitic fervor, especially in the Middle East, but it doesn't account for all of it. Anti-Semitism in the Middle East, mostly imported from Europe, predates the 1967 occupation by several decades. And Israel's policies are not made in Copenhagen, Paris, or Brussels.

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, wrote recently that virulent anti-Semitism arises when defeated and humiliated people seek an enemy to blame for their circumstances. That helps explain its rise in a defeated Germany after World War I as well as in the Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The irrational, hateful trope of anti-Semitism—“the Jews are to blame”—has staying power. Yet its expression usually has a local dimension: the hatred serves as a calculated political diversion (as in some Arab states) or as a perverted expression of disenfranchisement (as with some Muslim immigrants in Europe). Such discriminations don't change the maliciousness of anti-Semitism, but they help in determining causes and assessing how its appeal may be undermined.

Anti-Semitism flourished in the United States a hundred years ago. Jews faced widespread discrimination in employment, housing, education, and social clubs. But over the years courts dismantled barriers and civil rights watchdogs raised awareness, and Jews entered the social and economic mainstream. A Pew study last summer found that Jews are the religious group viewed most favorably in this country. The recent record of this country is far from unblemished with regard to anti-Semitism, but its history offers some hope that this malignant hatred can be tamed.

**A vicious anti-Semitism persists on the streets of Europe as well as in the Middle East and on the Internet.**



# CENTURY marks

**COMING OUT CHRISTIAN:** When the liberal political pundit Ana Marie Cox decided to come out as a Christian, she was worried less about the response from her secular colleagues than about that of Christians. She worried that they wouldn't approve of a "progressive, feminist, tattooed, pro-choice, graduate-educated believer." When people ask her why she now seems happier and freer, she's tempted to say it's because she moved out of Washington, D.C. But the honest answer is: "I try, every day, to give my will and my life over to God. I try to be like Christ. I get down on my knees and pray." Cox said, "I am saved not because of who I am or what I have done (or didn't do), but simply because I have accepted the infinite grace that was always offered to me" (*Daily Beast*, February 28).

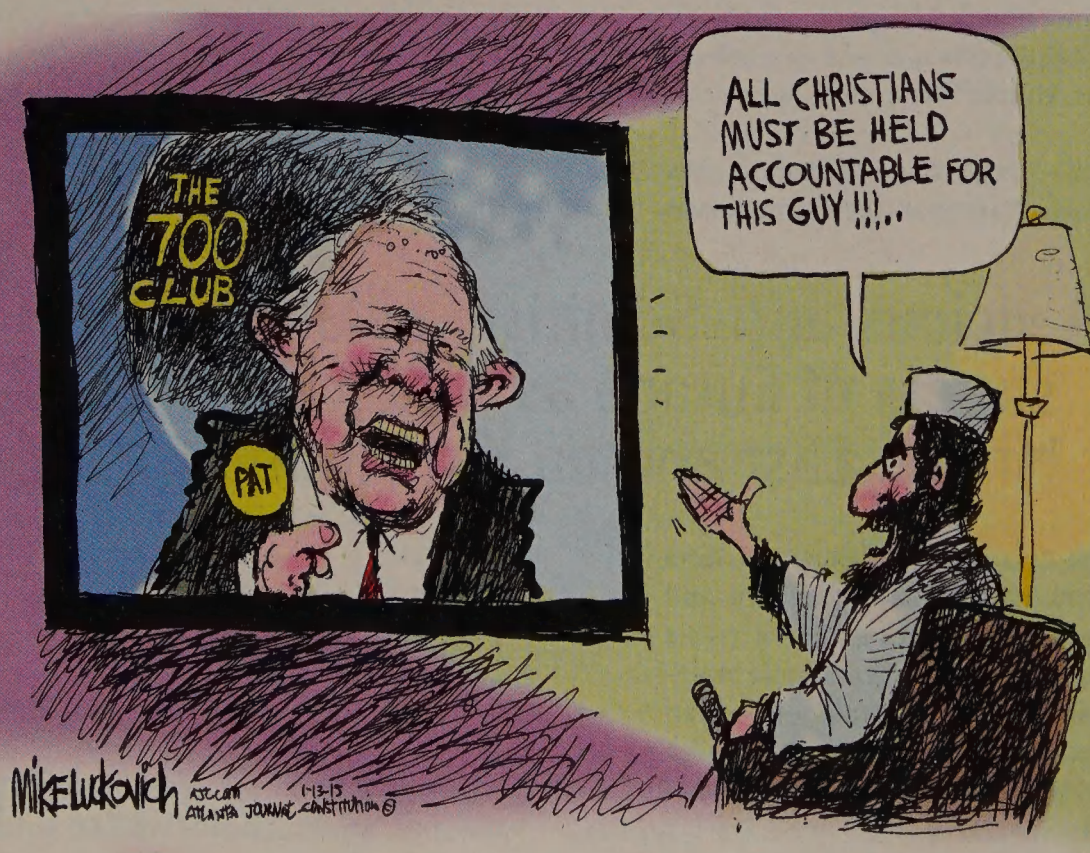
**HOPE ON DEATH ROW:** Kelly Gissendaner sits on death row, awaiting execution by the state of Georgia, having been convicted of the murder of her husband. Jennifer McBride met Gissendaner in a theology program for inmates in which McBride was teaching. McBride, who now teaches at Wartburg College, says that Gissendaner confessed her crime, repented, and has become a redeemed person. She's been reconciled to her children, she ministers to other inmates in prison, and counsels troubled youth. In the theology program, Gissendaner started a correspondence with German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, finding hope in his theology of hope. Gissendaner's initial date for execution was postponed due to concerns about the chemicals being used (CNN.com, March 6).

**CATHOLIC CONSENSUS?** Four U.S. Catholic publications published a joint editorial calling for the end of capital punishment. The editorial had in view an upcoming U.S. Supreme Court case out of Oklahoma that raises the question of whether lethal injection is cruel and unusual punishment. The editors of *National Catholic Reporter*, *America*, *National Catholic Register*, and *Our Sunday Visitor* point out that citizens, acting through their government, are the moral agent in these executions (*National Catholic Reporter*, March 5).

**WHAT JESUS SAID:** Randy Beckum, chaplain and vice-president of community formation at MidAmerica Nazarene University, was relieved of some of his duties for a "controversial sermon" he preached in chapel at the Olathe, Kansas, school. His audience was riled by the suggestion that Christians should take seriously Jesus' injunction to love one's enemies and by his questioning of Christians' use of violence. MNU's president issued a statement intended to protect academic freedom, but which had the effect of distancing the college from the teachings of Jesus: "At MidAmerica Nazarene University we encourage the exchange of ideas and individuals are free to express their individual perspective and opinions, even when those opinions may not reflect the official policy or practices of our university, our core values or our affiliations" (Patheos, March 6).

**GOOD SPORTS?** Children who sing in a choir, play in an orchestra, or perform in a play are more likely to make good moral choices compared to their peers. This finding was the result of a study at the University of Birmingham involving

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10,000 British children and 250 teachers. The study also concluded that participation in sports doesn't necessarily lead to better moral choices. The findings suggest that sports build character only when parents and coaches work to ensure that outcome. Children who go to church, get good grades, and have parents with a higher level of education also did better in the moral choices measure (*Telegraph*, February 27).

**DIALING UP DOUBT:** A hotline was launched by Recovering from Religion to respond to questions from people wrestling with religion, suffering from loss of faith, or concerned about a relative embracing atheism. The hotline aims to help them find their own answers. Those running the hotline are not therapists, but volunteers who have been given training. "If churches suddenly started welcoming doubters to their potlucks, the hotline project wouldn't be necessary," said Sarah Morehead, executive director of Recovering from Religion (CNN.com, February 28).

**MORALITY PLAY:** Despite its reputation as a pornographic film, *50 Shades of Grey* is a smash hit in the religiously conservative south. Mississippi and Arkansas, two of the most religious states in the country, led the nation in preopening ticket sales. Edward L. Rubin, who teaches law at Vanderbilt, thinks the movie is particularly popular in southern states because it gives people there a chance to talk about a changing morality. "It gives the audience a chance to think about their own ideas of right and wrong" (*Salon*, February 20).

**FAJITAS AND PRAYER:** An appellate court in New Jersey has ruled that a man who was burned while praying over sizzling fajitas can't sue Applebee's restaurant. The customer said that while he was praying over the meal he heard a popping noise and then felt a burning sensation on his left eye and face. He later claimed that his arms and neck were also burned from the sizzling fajita and that the waitress did not warn him about the danger. The trial judge dismissed the suit, ruling that the restaurant didn't have to warn him of an obvious danger (*Courier-Post*, March 5).

**“If someone had told me when we were crossing this bridge that one day I would be back here introducing the first African American president, I would've said, 'You're crazy, you're out of your mind, you don't know what you're talking about.'”**

— Congressman **John Lewis**, introducing President Obama at the 50th anniversary of the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. It was referred to as Bloody Sunday because police savagely beat demonstrators who were crossing a bridge [*Washington Post*, March 7].

**“I've often wondered why the people who seem most certain about the existence of God are the ones who want to keep the respirator plugged in. If you were sure that God was waiting for your father, wouldn't you want him to go? Wouldn't you want him to go even if you didn't believe in God, because death is the completion of our purpose here?”**

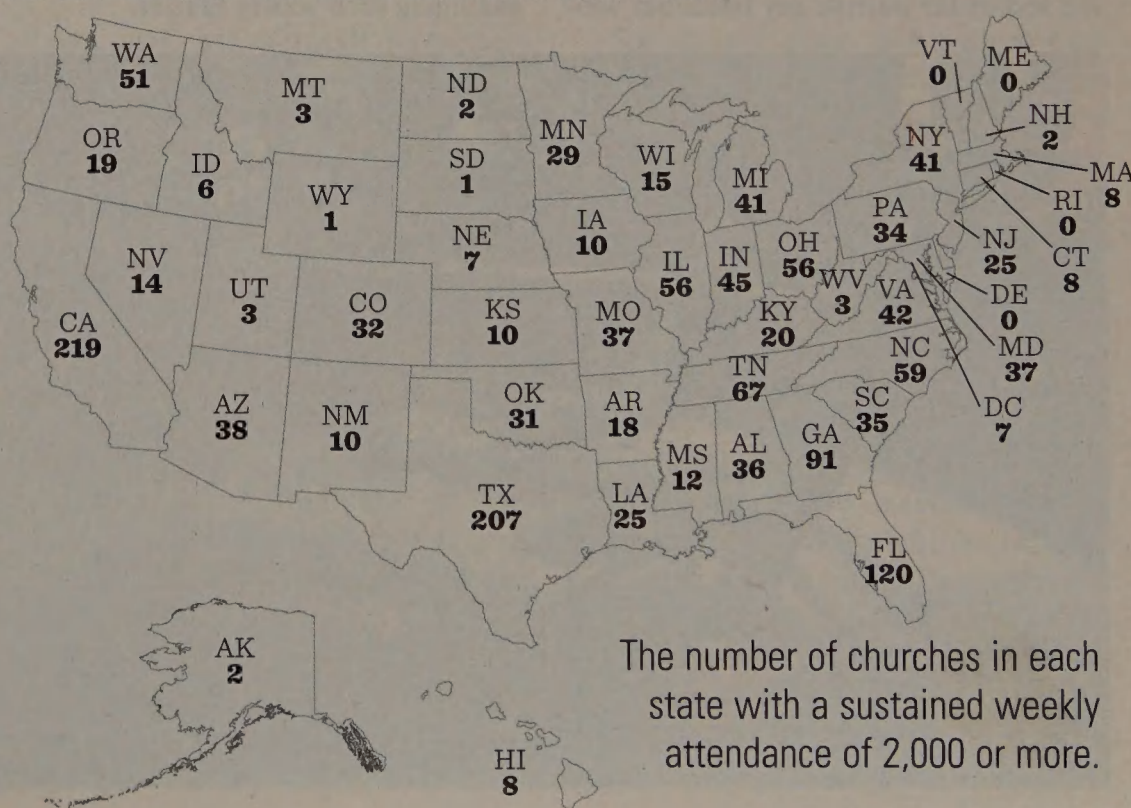
— Writer **Ann Patchett** [*New York Times*, March 1]

**CUT UP:** Under the sway of the multimillionaire religious guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, 400 men in India cut off their own testicles to “bring them closer to God.” Although this happened in 2000 at a hospital run by Ram Rahim, the facts are just now coming to light. Only one castration victim has come forward so far. His lawyer says he

thought he'd become a social outcast if he didn't follow the guru's teaching. Ram Rahim, who has also been accused of assault by some female followers, is under investigation by India's Central Bureau of Investigation. He has an estimated following of 50 million people worldwide (*International Business Times*, March 1).

## MEGACHURCHES IN AMERICA

SOURCE: SCOTT THUMMA, HARTFORD INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION RESEARCH [VOX, FEBRUARY 8]





# Not yet spring

Text and photographs by Terra Brockman

A MOVEMENT catches the corner of my eye just before dark on an early February evening. I glance up from my seed and fruit tree catalogs to see the silhouette of an owl in flight—steady, silent, strong.

I forget to breathe for a moment as he glides low and slow, barely five feet off the snow-covered ground. One effortlessly buoyant wing beat, and he melds into the woods.

Whose woods these are I think I know, for I hear the barred owl call from them each night. The birds are loquacious at this time of year, as males seek their mates and prepare for the spring season of egg laying and owlet feeding.

Although it's almost dark, I saw brown-gray stripes on the buff background of the three-foot wingspread, confirming that my night visitor is the barred owl who asks each night, from the red cedar outside my bedroom win-

dow, "Whooo, whoooo, who cooks for yoooooooouu?"

Each time he queries me I answer back, "I do." I set snap traps for the mice that invade the house each winter, put their soft bodies outside, and within 24 hours they are gone. I like to think I'm

I mostly hear complaints about the ice and snow, the slushy corners, the long dark nights, the fact that it is not yet spring. It's been too long since Christmas and the revelry of New Year's, and most folks just wish that our midwestern winter were over. But this lingering "not-yet-

**This is still mostly a time of rest, a time to revel in the soft stillness of an owl flying or snow falling.**

feeding the owl, although it could be a raptor, red-tailed or Cooper's hawk, or just a raccoon, opossum, or even a stray cat. In any case, each time we have our neighborly exchange I find myself wishing such interspecies pleasantries were more common. This is the time for indulging such winter fancies.

spring" is a precious time, especially for me, and especially this year.

For the first time in the entire 22 years since my brother Henry started his farm, neither he nor his wife Hiroko will be on the farm. They have left for Japan to take a year's sabbatical. The word *sabbatical* comes straight from Shabbat, God's day of rest after six hard days' work creating the universe. It also refers to an extended period of leave from one's work—not so much for rest as for pursuing a specific goal, one impossible to attain while immersed in day-to-day busyness.

The day-to-day, sunup-to-sundown physical labor and mental concentration involved in growing and selling more than 650 varieties of vegetables has certainly been all-consuming. Henry explained his goal for his sabbatical in a letter to his customers:

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*Terra Brockman is the author of The Seasons on Henry's Farm (Agate Surrey) and the founder of the Land Connection. She's currently co-producing a documentary based on her brother Henry's farm in the Mackinaw River Valley of central Illinois: [www.henrysfarmmovie.com](http://www.henrysfarmmovie.com).*





In a sense, a lack of perspective brought me to farming, and what I love about farming. Farming is a job that you can sink into. As a matter of fact, you have to sink into it. You cannot flit along the surface of farming and be successful at it. It is a full-immersion profession.

That total immersion, the total concentration of mind, body, and soul, the shooting of the rapids that occurs when I launch myself upon the stream of the seasons and allow the current of the universe to pull me from one day to the next to the next—that is the source of the intense joy I gain from farming.

But there is a downside to this immersion life, to living in this eternal cycle of the seasons. And that downside is a loss of perspective. Or rather a loss of the time and distance required to acquire perspective. While what I love about farming is living each moment in time and space, in order to gain perspective one has to step out of time and place.

While Henry begins his year away, these short wintry days of early spring are a mini-sabbatical for me, with time to walk, read, write, daydream, and gain perspective before a new farming season is upon us. This is the calm before the storm of spring farm work. Even in snowy February, Henry's farm hands are prepping the hoop houses. But for them and for me, this is still mostly a time of rest, a time to revel in the soft stillness of an owl flying or snow falling.

Recently I walked down to the stream that separates the two fertile bottomland fields of Henry's farm. It was nearly covered in ice, but underneath water and air bubbles rushed along, breaking to the surface and flowing brightly and swiftly over rocky rills framed by ice crystals that flashed like fire. My thoughts carried me to the words attributed to Fra Giovanni Giocondo, a brilliant artist, architect, and writer from 15th-century Verona: "There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see, and to see, we have only to look."



Long, dark winter nights have their bright side—figuratively, in the quiet time they provide, and also quite literally. The past few nights have been spectacular for moon gazing, and for soaking up the softly sparkling stillness. Each night three luminaries have risen in the east—the blazing planet Jupiter above the moon, and alongside, Regulus, the brightest star in the constellation Leo. Their combined light, reflected off the bright snow, brings a glorious radiance to the darkness.

But Giocondo's sentence is also metaphorical. Even when we are in dark despair, there are flickers of light if our eyes and hearts are open. The light may come from celestial bodies, from water flowing under ice, or from a silent ghost of the bird world floating by with supernatural grace.

Spring will come, and with it hundreds of thousands of seeds to plant, and tens of thousands of transplants, and endless mulching, weeding, trellising, and all the other tasks that bring good food to the table. Soon my eyes will be turned to the earth below much more often than to the skies above.

I return to my seed catalogs and my fruit tree fantasies. It's dark, so I listen to what my eyes can't see: icicles and water, old differences dissolved, dripping down to earth together. Occasionally mini-avalanches of snow fall softly from my roof. They will soon melt onto patio stones and make their way into the garden where strawberry plant roots will drink water as they green, blossom, and bear fruit come June.





## Christians, Muslims persecuted in Myanmar

**D**espite democratic reforms and international pressure that have pushed Myanmar to improve its human rights record in recent years, religious freedom remains heavily constrained across the country.

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in this majority Buddhist country has attracted international media and foreign policy attention. But in Chin State, along Myanmar's northwest border, a predominantly Christian population faces its own challenges and restrictions.

"There is no improvement with regard to religious freedom in Chin State," said Pu Zoe Ram, chairman of the Chin National Democratic Party. "Authorities destroyed crosses during the military regime and continue to do so."

Teak and steel crosses atop clock towers, hillsides, and Chin State's nearly 2,000 churches have long identified the local majority religion. Area Christians consider the destruction of those crosses at the behest of government agencies a direct attack on their faith community.

The Chin Human Rights Organization documented 13 incidents of large crosses being destroyed by order of the Ministry of Religious Affairs during the country's half-century-long military regime, which formally ended in 2011. Since then and under nominally democratic rule, at least four more large crosses have been destroyed.

"The previous regime repressed the Christian religion," said Daw Zar Tlem, a member of Myanmar's House of Representatives who represents the township of Thang Tlang in Chin. "The army pulled down crosses, which are sacred. The new government is doing the same and is refusing permission to build new churches."

In July 2011, shortly after Myanmar's

military junta was officially dissolved, two crosses were burned in the townships of Kyin Dawe and Kan Pat Lat. Local Christians in Hakha and Falam were ordered to replace crosses with Buddhist shrines, and a cross in Tiddim Township was removed to make way for a new road, officials from Myanmar's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party told villagers.

According to data from Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are 108 Buddha images and shrines in Chin State, compared with 1,958 churches—a reflection of the state's Christian majority.

Pu Zozam, a member of parliament from Chin State, said that although army and local authorities have tried to block the replacement crosses, "it is our belief and our responsibility" to continue to replace them.

"There are 13 crosses that still need to be replaced," he said. "We put up the crosses on our land originally, so we do not think it necessary to ask permission to replace them."

Cross destruction isn't the only problem plaguing Chin State's Christians.

Salai Ling, program director of Chin Human Rights Organization, said that schools in border ethnic regions have been set up to convert Christians to Buddhism.

There are 29 border development schools around the country, established under President U Thein Sein's current 30-year plan. One-third of these schools are in Chin State.

"Thirty years is a generation," Salai Ling said. "This project is targeting us. The government's plan is to intentionally change our beliefs and mind-sets."



PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS / DAMIAN SAGOLJA

**SACRED SYMBOL:** A man and a child from a Christian family look out from their home in the industrial suburbs of Yangon, Myanmar. In the country's Chin State, authorities have been destroying crosses, even after democratic reforms.



Some say the discrimination goes both ways. Although Buddhists do not face official discrimination in Chin State, Saya Mya, a Chin Buddhist teacher, said they feel it indirectly.

“When Christians hold youth gatherings or public forums, they start or close the ceremonies with prayers, which makes non-Christians uncomfortable,” he said. —Mang Suan Kim, Religion News Service

## Religious noise pollution in a Buddhist culture

WHILE MYANMAR’S strict curbs on religious freedom continue to draw international scrutiny, its lax enforcement of noise limits is attracting the ire of locals.

Residents of the densely populated cities of Mandalay and Yangon are demanding stronger rules and regulations to control the use of loudspeakers in the predominantly Buddhist country’s many religious festivals. Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) also has Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and animist communities.

Local Buddhist holidays, including Vesak and the Tazaungdaing festival, along with Christmas, Diwali, and Eid al-Fitr, are often celebrated with music, dance, stage performances, and carnivals.

While complaints about loud church bells or the Muslim call to prayer from minarets are common in other cities, locals say the noisy atmosphere detracts from the festivals’ religious origins—and the country’s quiet Buddhist image.

U Ngwe Khee, a Mandalay taxi driver, lives near a Buddhist Dharma center where monks use loudspeakers to play music and announce how much money each person has donated.

“We have already contributed cash, and they have collected money door-to-door in our area,” Ngwe Khee said. “They should not ask for more donations by making noise. The noise is very disruptive and disappointing.”

U Hla Sein, a retired teacher in Mandalay, agrees.

“They should have more understanding, since this is a religious activity,” he said. “They play music before religious ceremonies, but the music is not related to faith at all. But because they refer to religion, we cannot complain.”

Myanmar’s temperate winters attract foreign tourists at the same time that many of the loudest and most popular Buddhist religious festivals are being celebrated.

“People visit our country looking for a peaceful place, but when modern music is played in these ceremonies it can be quite disturbing for surrounding residents, and also tourists may get the wrong perception of Buddhism,” Mandalay tour guide Naing Tun Lin said.

Some hotels have started preemptively apologizing for the noise.

Last November, the 79 Living Hotel in Mandalay greeted guests with a note in English explaining that monks would be collecting donations over loudspeakers during the Tazaungdaing festival.

Naing Tun Lin, a tour guide, said authorities should consult locals to set guidelines for when music can be played and at what volume to minimize disturbances.

Authorities must grant permission to use sound systems or loudspeakers. People who violate this rule can be fined up to 5,000 kyat (about \$5) or imprisoned for up to seven days.

Buddhist religious sites and houses of worship are not the only ones keeping neighbors awake. Some Buddhist families play recordings of monks’ teachings over loudspeakers early in the morning to bring good luck.

Other faiths are also causing complaints. Maung Maung Swe, a journalist in the capital city of Yangon, said the noise from a Hindu temple near his house sometimes continues until 2 a.m.

“We don’t want to blame it on religious activity, but no one can sleep through the night,” he said. —Mann Kyaw and Brian Pellot, Religion News Service

## Assyrian Christians face attacks from Islamic State

Assyrian Christians who live in Syria and Iraq have faced religious persecution for much of their modern history.

The world was reminded of that stark reality in late February when militants from the self-described Islamic State reportedly captured dozens of Assyrians—estimates range from 70 to 150—living in villages along the Khabur River in northeastern Syria. Their fate remains unclear but fits a pattern of IS persecution of minorities in areas it seeks to subjugate.

“We are watching a living history and all that comprises disappear,” wrote Mardean Isaac of A Demand for Action, a group that focuses on religious minorities in the Middle East.

So who are the Assyrians? Alternatively known as Syriac, Nestorian, or Chaldean Christians, they trace their roots back more than 6,500 years to ancient Mesopotamia, predating the Abrahamic religions. For 1,800 years the Assyrian empire dominated the region, establishing one of most advanced civilizations in the ancient world. An example of this is the city of Arbel, one of the earliest permanent agricultural settlements.

The Assyrian empire collapsed in 612 BC with the rise of the Persians. Six hundred years later, Assyrians became among the earliest converts to Christianity. They still speak a form of Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, and consider themselves the last indigenous people of Syria and Iraq.

Following the birth of Christianity, Assyrian missionaries spread across Asia from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and built a new empire that lasted until Arab Muslims swept through the Middle East in 630.

Eden Naby, an Assyrian researcher and Middle East historian, said their modern history has been marred by violence and persecution. Between 1914 and 1918 more than 500,000 Assyrians were killed during the Armenian genocide in present-day Turkey.



More recently the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator, has exposed Assyrians and other minorities to sectarian strife. Emigration has shrunk the community of Assyrians in Iraq from about 1.4 million in 1987 to 400,000 at last count, according to Al Jazeera. Others live in Turkey and Iran.

About 40,000 Assyrians remain in Syria, according to an estimate from the BBC—a number that experts say is likely to decline. Christians are estimated to have constituted about 10 percent of Syria's 22 million people before civil war erupted in 2011. Many Assyrians have since fled to escape the ongoing conflict and violent attacks by Islamic extremist groups such as IS.

"These people along the river are refugees," Naby said in a phone interview. "They've experienced a hundred years of this."

A majority of Assyrians now live among the diaspora in the United States and Europe, with sizable populations in Germany and Sweden.

The Assyrians who stayed in Syria are concentrated in al-Hasakah province in the sparsely populated northeast. Some have joined a militia, the Syriac Military Council, which recently fought alongside Syrian Kurds.

Activists say IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has forced Christians living in the territory it controls to convert to Islam, pay a religious tax (*jizya*), or face death. A few weeks ago, the group ordered Assyrians in the area to remove crosses from churches, according to the Assyrian International News Agency.

The Assyrians are not the only religious or ethnic minority group who face such threats from IS. Shi'a Shabaks, Turkmen, and Yazidis have all been targeted as part of the extremist group's campaign in Syria and Iraq, where it has declared a caliphate.

"These groups have a long history of marginalization," said Sarah Margon of Human Rights Watch in a testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, a congressional caucus, in December, referring to Assyrians and other minorities. "But ISIS

has intensified this ostracism, labeling them as crusaders, heretics, and devil worshipers and then threatening them with death if they don't convert to Islam."

Experts fear that captured Assyrians could face a similar fate to that of the Egyptian Christians in Libya. But IS could also use the captives to try to arrange a prisoner swap with Kurdish militias. The extremists are reportedly holding them in al-Shaddadeh, south of the city of al-Hasakah. —Michael Holtz, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Assyrian Christians form battalion to combat ISIS

Assyrian Christians in the Nineveh plains, with the help of a group of Americans, are building a battalion to combat the so-called Islamic State.

The Nineveh Plain Protection Units, or NPU, is composed of 350 to 500 men trained by Sons of Liberty International, an American-led nonprofit organization aimed at "stepping in where governments in the international community have failed."

Its founder, Matthew VanDyke, a

New York filmmaker who fought in the Libyan civil war and spent six months as a prisoner of war under the Muammar Qaddafi regime, said when the group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, executed his friends James Foley and Steven Sotloff he started to focus on stopping its spread.

When the Kurdish Peshmerga withdrew from the area, the people of the Nineveh plains were left to be killed or kidnapped, VanDyke said.

The Nineveh plains lie northeast of Mosul in Iraq's Ninawa Province. The population is majority Christian but also includes Yazidis, Shabaks, Kurds, and Turkmen.

"We have rights to defend our land and to preserve our holy land, and to preserve our habits and traditions," said Kaldo Oghanna, an NPU official.

The people of the Nineveh plains say they must fight to protect themselves from extinction. But they also say that they should be funded and treated like any other tribal army, many of which are receiving funds and supplies to fight terrorism in the area.

"If you give us half what you give to Peshmerga or other military forces, we will do double what they're doing now," said Gevara Zaya, NPU Military Committee director. —Therese Apel, *USA Today*



PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS / YOUSSEF BOUDAL

**REFUGEES:** Displaced people from the minority Yazidi sect, who fled violence in the Iraqi province of the Nineveh plains in northern Iraq, take shelter at Margurgis Church in Dohuk.



## Studying faith and hope in the face of death

After the recent death of 26-year-old aid worker Kayla Mueller of Prescott, Arizona, who was held captive for months by the so-called Islamic State, her parents released a brief, handwritten letter she had sent to her family.

"I remember Mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God," Kayla Mueller wrote. "I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator. . . . by God [and] by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in free fall."

Her words resonate with what a developing body of research is finding: religion can be a critical resource in reducing anxiety about death.

Not all will benefit equally, and some may suffer greater worries if they believe they will be found wanting by a judgmental divinity. But the research opens windows of understanding for caregivers, family, and friends.

American belief in eternal life has remained relatively unchanged in recent decades despite a rise in secularism. In the 1976 General Social Survey, nearly three-quarters of respondents said they believed in a life after death. The percentage holding that belief was unchanged in the 2012 survey.

A number of studies indicate a strong faith and a deeply held belief in the afterlife allows individuals to better cope with their fears of mortality. Consider these findings from research since 2011:

- A study of nearly 1,000 members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) found that more frequent church attendance, involvement in church activities outside of worship, and belief in life after death were all associated with less fear of the unknown beyond this life. More frequent prayer and Bible reading were related to lesser fear of dying in pain.

- Religion and spirituality were important sources of support and comfort to most participants in a study of parents of children facing life-threatening conditions. Parents reported belief in an afterlife was "reassuring," providing "peace"



**STRENGTH IN PRAYERS:** *A letter by Kayla Mueller—whose hometown of Prescott, Arizona, created a memorial for her on ■ main street—expressed the comfort she found in faith as she faced the possibility of being killed.*

and "acceptance," and helped parents to be "not afraid" of their children's deaths and to "trust in God to take care of [our child]."

- Reading religious texts was related to lower anxiety about death among individuals who were highly religious, according to a study of college students and church members.

What the study findings also reveal, however, is that individual responses to death anxiety vary widely across a spectrum of beliefs.

For example, in the study of parents with ill children, some parents found it helpful to express their anger toward God, but others moved away from their faith. And in the study of students and church members, those with low degrees of religiousness reported greater anxiety after reading a religious text.

"Religion may be one human response to being alive and having to die, but unless it is your response, it may be a poor one," the authors said.

The findings are a reminder of how belief in an afterlife is the way many members find meaning in their lives amid the reality of death.

The studies also illustrate that individuals find different resources in the face of death. Rather than press their own views, professional caregivers, friends, and family might do better to listen to those struggling with their feelings and beliefs. —David Briggs, theARDA.com

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## Episcopal Church examines policies on alcohol abuse after bishop's DUI crash

Episcopal Church clergy and laypeople alike are rereading church policy on alcohol and the consecration of bishops after a fatal December crash in Baltimore in which a bishop drove while drunk.

They are discussing how addiction is handled and whether the church itself was in any way culpable in the death of cyclist Thomas Palermo, a 41-year-old husband and father of two.

Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies, one of two main governing bodies of the 2-million-member denomination, said many Episcopalians are asking why church leaders allowed Heather Cook to be confirmed as bishop last September despite their knowledge of her struggle with alcohol.

"Sometimes a tragedy happens and people move on after a couple of weeks," Jennings said. "This particular tragedy has caused many people to not only look at the issue of alcoholism and other drug addictions but also how we select and elect our leaders, our bishops."

Jennings is appointing a committee to review the church's policies on alcohol and drug abuse, which date back to 1985, and to propose new resolutions to be considered at the church's General Convention in Salt Lake City from June 25 to July 3.

In a recent letter to lay and clergy members of the House of Deputies, Jennings suggested that church leaders were too timid in the face of Cook's problems. The bishop, 58, now faces 13 charges, including vehicular homicide, texting while driving, and leaving the scene of the crime (she later returned).

In 2010, Cook was caught behind the wheel with a blood alcohol level of .27—more than three times the legal limit in Maryland—and pleaded guilty. That information was not disclosed last May when Cook was elected a suffragan, or deputy, bishop of Maryland.

"The church can sometimes confuse secrecy and confidentiality," Jennings wrote to the deputies. "Our desire for rec-



conciliation can sometimes make us reluctant to confront one another in love.”

The church’s presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, who presided at Cook’s consecration last September, has formally restricted Cook’s public ministry, directing her not to present herself “as an ordained person of this Church in good standing.”

As the Episcopal Church’s carefully crafted policy on alcohol use shows, it has hardly ignored the issue. Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church—operating independently but alongside the church—help parishes across the country with clergy or congregants struggling with drugs and alcohol. And the church’s flagship General Theological Seminary in New York is one of the few seminaries in the nation to offer a course on how the church can battle addiction.

Leaders of most other major denominations, including some teetotaling Baptists, have acknowledged addiction problems among clergy and laity alike. Still, Bishop J. Scott Barker of Nebraska said he suspects the problem may be particularly acute among Episcopalians.

“I wonder if we’re not using alcohol as a larger system to hide from the hard realities of a church which is under a lot of pressure right now and in decline in a lot of places,” he said. Alcohol “is one way to anesthetize yourself in light of larger trends. Just keep celebrating.”

Barker’s desire to think deeply and clearly at the church’s national meeting this summer, as well as to mark the death of the cyclist, led him to invite other bishops and delegates to join him in abstaining from alcohol at General Convention.

“I’m mindful of the recent tragedy in Maryland, and the chance to make a small witness for delight in sobriety as a bishop of the Church,” he wrote last month on the Nebraska Episcopalian website. “I note that in the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska so many wonderful disciples are in recovery and could use some support—and so many parish churches are hobbled by alcoholic family systems long in place.”

Shannon Tucker, president of the Tennessee-based Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church, said he’s grateful for all the recent attention placed on alcoholism in the church, and for Jen-

nings’s intent to keep the problem in the spotlight when the church gathers in Salt Lake City. But the hard work of battling addiction must also happen elsewhere, he said.

“Passing a resolution and reaffirming the ones we’ve already passed are great things to do,” said Tucker. “It has to be the local diocese and bishops and clergy who decide that they want to join us in our work.”

The church could also prove itself by designating dollars for these efforts, Tucker said.

That could happen, Jennings said, noting that the church will consider addiction issues at the General Convention before it passes a budget.

In the meantime, the Diocese of Maryland has formally asked Cook to resign. After posting bail, she checked herself into an addiction treatment facility. —Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service

## African church leaders oppose female genital mutilation in hospitals

International rights groups, churches, and activists are escalating campaigns against female genital mutilation now that girls are checking into hospitals to have the procedure.

In what is being referred to as the medicalization of FGM, doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners are secretly performing the procedures at the request of families.

“They are performing FGM for the money in hospitals and other places,” said Richard Nyangoto, a Roman Catholic priest in Kisii County, an area in Kenya’s southwest where FGM is widely practiced.

Health-care providers now perform up to 18 percent of FGM cases, and the trend is growing, according to the World Health Organization.

“Taking it to hospital does not make it right,” Nyangoto said. “It’s evil.”

The move to hospitals is driven by the desire to improve hygiene and avoid infection, said Grace Uwizeye, the FGM

Program officer at Equality Now, a global women’s rights organization.

A mix of religious, cultural, and social factors perpetuate the practice. In many communities the partial removal of a woman’s external genitalia is part of the traditional rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. Consequences include severe pain and bleeding, shock, difficulty passing urine, infection, and even death.

In 2014, an Egyptian father and a doctor were acquitted for the murder of a young girl, Soheir al-Batea, who died on the operating table while undergoing FGM.

In Kenya, at least three deaths were attributed to FGM in 2014. They include 13-year-old Raima Ntagusa and 16-year-old Alivina Noel, who died after giving birth because her body had not healed from the cut.

“Communities claim it’s difficult to stop since the practice is deeply rooted,” said Judith Nyaata, FGM Project coordinator at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya.

Nyaata, who works among the Pokot people of Kenya, said it is treated as part of marriage—women who have undergone the rite can barter for more cows as part of their bridal price. During the FGM process, women go into seclusion and are taught about life as wives and mothers. As it concludes, there is a celebration.

“The festival involves strong teaching about life and is accompanied by a lot of celebration and feasting,” Nyaata said. “This makes it hard for communities to quit it.”

African governments have unveiled new laws that ban FGM; more than 20 African countries have such laws in their constitutions.

But little progress has been achieved since 1997 when the pressure to end it started mounting, according to WHO. Rates in most African countries have stayed stable or fallen only marginally since then. The organization estimates that over 125 million girls and women in 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East have undergone some form of FGM.

“I think we still need more strategies and action to deter this,” said Adama Faye, a Lutheran church leader in Senegal, where FGM is also practiced. —Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service



## People

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHALICE PRESS



■ **Fred B. Craddock**, a preeminent teacher and practitioner of preaching, died March 6 at age 86 in Blue Ridge, Georgia. He had been ill with Parkinson's disease.

Craddock taught preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology from 1979 to 1994. His influential books included *As One Without Authority* and *Overhearing the Gospel*.

Thomas G. Long, who followed Craddock as the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler, said that mainline Protestant preachers around the country have been affected by his style.

"Fred was in some ways an ironic presence because he neither looked nor sounded like the powerhouse he was; he was a short man with a high voice," Long said. "But his words were absolutely compelling."

Many preachers imitate him, though he was inimitable, said Long, speaking the day after preaching at Craddock's funeral at Cherry Log (Georgia) Christian Church, where Craddock was minister emeritus.

"He'd pause more than most preachers do," Long said. "He'd imply that a dialogue was taking place even when he was the only one talking."

In 1996 Baylor University placed Craddock among the 12 "most effective preachers in the English-speaking world." On its 25th anniversary in 2010, *Preaching* magazine created its own list of the 25 most influential pastors in the pulpit in America during its existence as a publication; Craddock was 16th. His 1985 book, titled *Preaching*, was fourth on the publication's list of the 25 most influential preaching books in that same period.

"Craddock's book (like the author

himself) has influenced a generation of young preachers to discover the power of inductive approaches and the use of story in preaching," Michael Duduit of *Preaching* wrote. He added that it "probably has been the most widely used preaching text in seminary classrooms in the past 25 years."

In a 2003 article for the *CENTURY* on Ash Wednesday, Craddock wrote that "if the liturgical movements of the Christian community at some time and place seem not to move or stir, bending no knee, bowing no head, drawing no tear, lifting no heart, the intent of the liturgy is not served by abandoning it. Rather, one is better advised to join the assembly of others who struggle with their faith and in their faith, and in this company pray together."

Craddock was born in Humboldt, Tennessee. He graduated from Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1953 and earned a doctorate from Vanderbilt University in 1964. He was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and taught at Phillips, affiliated with the Disciples denomination.

"In Fred, genuine greatness paired with rare humility," Sharon Watkins, Disciples general minister and president, wrote on her blog. "In story after personal story, a man of impeccable integrity and genuine caring emerges—a man who took the Gospel seriously." —Celeste Kennel-Shank, *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*

■ **Malcolm Boyd**, an Episcopal priest and pioneer among gay Christians, died February 27 at the age of 91.

Boyd was an A-list producer in Hollywood until he gave up that life in 1951 to become an Episcopal priest. He was one of the Freedom Riders in 1961 and worked in Alabama and marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma.

In 1977, he came out as a gay man, and in the 1980s and 1990s he ministered to those affected by HIV/AIDS.

Boyd wrote 28 books, including *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?*

Boyd also wrote for the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY* on prayer and social issues. In

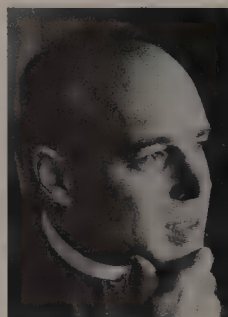


PHOTO COURTESY OF MALCOLM BOYD ARCHIVES

a personal essay in 1974, he wrote about growing up in New York, then moving as a teenager to Texas and Oklahoma.

"I reject the self-righteous claims of both half-moons, the social gospel and the personal gospel. Each is inadequate without the other," he wrote. "Christ is reduced to a perpetual caricature of an angry young man overturning money-changers' tables inside the temple; or else he is locked—*locked*—inside a stained-glass window (where, blue-eyed and blond-haired, he gazes limply at the dew-wet grass at his bare feet)." —Religion News Service with added sources

■ **Theodore Hesburgh**, the longtime president of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, died February 26 at age 97.

For more than 50 years, he engaged issues such as civil rights, nuclear weapons, and abortion.

The *National Catholic Reporter* wrote that in 1968 he said, "Theology must be free, for it will be accepted as a true university discipline only if operates under the same kind of freedom and autonomy as do other disciplines."

He was ordained as a priest of the Congregation of the Holy Cross in 1943 and became president of Notre Dame in 1952. He held the position for 35 years. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964, and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2000. He was a founding member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and marched with Martin Luther King Jr.

At Notre Dame, *NCR* reported, he "was not able to find a balance between the male and female faculty, for the latter complained of unequal treatment and opportunities."

Michael Wear, who served in the Obama White House, met Hesburgh when President Obama accepted an invitation to deliver the commencement address at Notre Dame in 2009, sparking protests because of Obama's support of abortion rights.

"Hesburgh believed providing space for different viewpoints was a testament to one's confidence in his or her beliefs," Wear wrote. —Religion News Service, added sources



PHOTO BY JULIAN RUSSELL / COURTESY OF INTERFAITH ALLIANCE



# LIVING BY The Word

*April 5, Easter Sunday*

*Mark 16:1-8*

**IT IS NEVER** taking the easy way out to preach Mark's Gospel on Easter Sunday. The first time I tried it, I spent more time than usual in study. I looked for connections to the shock and awe the women at the tomb felt, and I contemplated their reasons for telling no one. I worked hard to make sure my sermon would explain how Mark's account is unique but without becoming the sort of thing that's more compelling in the footnotes than in the preaching.

The bulletin clearly listed the passage: Mark 16:1-8. I listened as the reader reached the end, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." I took a breath and prepared to stand and move to the pulpit—but wait! Clearly convinced that the bulletin contained a misprint, she continued to read. "Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons."

The story seemed incomplete to her. She thought that of course she was supposed to go on and read the contested longer ending of Mark, which describes various appearances by the risen Christ and names the signs of power passed on to his disciples, including the ability to handle snakes. Terror and amazement seized me, and I quickly considered the possibilities. If it hadn't been for the snakes, I might have let her continue. Instead I went to the lectern and quietly said, "We are stopping at verse 8 today."

She stopped, apologized, murmuring, "I thought it was 18." I gave her an encouraging smile and a pat on the arm, and she returned to her seat. It was uncomfortable.

Stopping at verse 8 leaves us all in an uncomfortable situation. We crave the resolution the additional verses bring. It's a day when we really want to offer a few "Alleluias" and "He is risens" and let the trumpets and the choir take care of the rest. The lectionary also assigns John's resurrection story, and we preachers may feel drawn to this more familiar version, in which Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Mark 16:1-8 leaves us mostly with questions. Why preach it?

I chose to because I find the discomfort compelling. Three women arrive at the tomb already living in a liminal moment, deeply grieved. They have come with a plan for their actions, a set of rituals meant both to mark the death of their friend and teacher and to help them begin the mourning process. The reality of Jesus' death weighs on them as they worry about how

they will get into the tomb to anoint his body. Who will roll away the stone?

Then things get real, yet unreal. The stone is already rolled away, the tomb already open. Instead of a dead body, they find a young man in white. Mark tells us that "they were alarmed."

I should think so. It's worth unpacking this alarm, slowing down the story to recall times in our own lives when the unexpected shocked us—and the effort it took to regather ourselves and decide how to respond. Our paths are strewn with these kinds of moments, in which our perceptions of reality are influenced by grief or anxiety or excitement. "I am poured out like water," says Psalm 22, "and all my bones are out of joint." This expression of being spiritually and emotionally out of joint captures human feelings of shock that transcend time and place.

I remember when my father called to tell me that my mother was dying. He could only repeat in a mumbling drawl, "It's bad. It's bad." It was the emotion in his voice—more than the words of the doctor who later explained my mother's metastatic cancer—that conveyed the end of the world as we knew it. When my daughter was born, I went through a difficult labor and delivery and suddenly understood as I hadn't before that the distance between life and death is immeasurably small. Years later, my son called late at night from an emergency room: he had been thrown from a car. I had to remind myself that the very fact that he was on the phone meant he must still be alive. This was good news, and I needed to inform others—but, shaken, I struggled to put the facts into words.

The women's response parallels these comparatively ordinary situations. With their horror and bereavement still fresh, they hear the kind of news we might fantasize about getting after a loved one dies—and they are afraid. Their fear reminds us that the good news of Christ's resurrection is not simply reliable news to be taken for granted. It is a truth so shocking that even the first people to hear it, people who hear it on the spot where it happened, cannot imagine how to tell anyone else.

On that Easter morning when the reader continued past verse 8, I planned to preach about the difference in Mark's ending. Did I need to stop the reader? Probably not, but in the heat of the moment, I leapt up on behalf of the women and their shocked response. Their story allows us to stand in their place, with our doubts and our questions and even our hopes. It offers an opportunity to talk about our own disbelief without rushing straight to the celebration. It reminds us that even when it's hard to believe, there is no good news unless someone shares it.



# Reflections on the lectionary

April 12, Second Sunday of Easter  
John 20:19-31

**I USED TO HAVE** a Bernese mountain dog named Sam. He was a sweet dog but not very smart. This was never more apparent than the time he had an infected paw, and the veterinarian told me to soak it in an iodine solution. Sam was tall and weighed 125 pounds. His paws were the size of bread plates. He was obedient enough for normal purposes, good on the leash, but it's hard to make a dog understand why he needs to keep his paw in a dish of funny-looking water. Human-canine communication does not work at such a complex level. I did the best I could to soothe him, and he did the best he could to explain to me that standing in a dish of water was ridiculous.

I'm sure he doubted me, if dogs can doubt. And I understand why he did. I also understand why Thomas doubts the story his friends tell him, because it makes about as much sense as an iodine solution in a Tupperware bowl.

"We have seen the Lord," they say, a statement Thomas has every reason to question. He knows Jesus was crucified and buried. He must have heard the story that Mary Magdalene reported to Peter and the disciple we know as "the other" disciple or "the beloved" disciple—how they followed her to the tomb and found it empty, how she stayed and wept and saw a man she understood to be Jesus, not dead at all, but more than simply alive.

We don't know what he thinks of this story, but we do know what he says when he hears about Jesus wafting through a locked door: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." He wants to see the hands that washed his feet, the feet that walked the roads with him.

Thomas knows Jesus as incarnate. He understands his humanity, his embodiment. He cannot easily make the leap to Jesus' new condition.

In a way it's easier for us, because we consider the story in a different order. The real wonder is God having hands and feet in the first place; the real wonder is God allowing human beings the power to nail those hands and feet to a cross. We start with the feet of little baby Jesus, with his tender and vulnerable humanity absolutely full of God-ness. When we believe this part of the story, the resurrection is a reasonable conclusion. Of course God who became human and died could then exist in another form!

I don't think this week's story is about Thomas's faith. It's about his perception. Thomas believes in Jesus, but Thomas doesn't think symbolically. In John 11 he is ready to go and die

by Jesus' side. In chapter 14, he is the only disciple to admit he does not know the way to the place Jesus is going. He would like to have a literal road map for following Jesus. He rejects an impractical story.

We all understand things differently. Some of us get faith with our minds, and others feel it with our hearts. Thomas has to get there with his senses. He wants to see and touch, to really know in the way that works best for him. Artists have portrayed him with his finger tentatively probing the wound in Jesus' side, the risen Lord come back once more to show him the marks.

Blessed are those who have faith but have not seen. These are hard words. There are days I want to see the marks. I wonder what God wants from me and how I can be pleasing to God at times when the way is not clear. I wish I could see God's intentions as clearly as the disciples do, to hear Christ speak words of instruction. He comes right through the locked doors. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Is Jesus scolding Thomas? Some people think so. So much of how we understand Bible stories, especially the more widely told ones, depends on the tone in which we hear them. I don't think Jesus is dismissing Thomas, or us, when we want or need to see more. The good news of the incarnation is that

## Thomas has to come to faith through the use of his senses.

Jesus has been like us. He knows both the beauties and the limitations of our human senses.

I like to hear Jesus' words this way, more kindly: "Better to be one who doesn't feel the limits. But Thomas, if you need to, put your hand here."

God must have to be awfully patient with us. Like a happy dog on a spring day, we stretch against the leash to get to the smell on that telephone pole, to read the message. Like a sad dog on a winter afternoon, we move a paw and knock over a dish of iodine and water, even though we didn't mean to do it. Like a pet owner who resorts to holding compresses on a wounded paw, God finds other means.

Yes, it's better to be the one who doesn't feel the limits. But we need not despair, for we worship a God who had a body and lets us see the marks of his love.

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*The author is Martha Spong, a United Church of Christ pastor and the director of RevGalBlogPals. She is editor of There's a Woman in the Pulpit, forthcoming from SkyLight Paths.*



# Choices and lives

by Charles C. Camosy

**THOSE WHO ATTEMPT** to limit abortion in the United States are often described by their opponents as “moving backward.” In the summer of 2013, for instance, the Texas legislature moved to ban abortion after 20 weeks and to require all abortion facilities to offer women easier access to hospitals in case abortions go wrong. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Jamila Bey spoke for many pro-choice people when she claimed that Texas was trying to “turn back the clock” on women’s rights.

But those who view Europe as more progressive than the United States on social issues like abortion might be surprised to learn that the Texas law is rather tame in comparison to European restrictions. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Holland, Spain, and Sweden restrict abortions to well before 20 weeks. Many countries draw the

## A new era looms in the public debate over abortion.

line at 12 weeks, and many require that the procedure be done in a hospital.

Health care. Paid maternity leave. Ecological concern. Especially for progressives, Europe stands for ideas and policies to which many hope the United States will aspire. But something that I call the Costanza strategy is in effect in the United States. I’ve named this phenomenon for the character George Costanza in *Seinfeld*, who once adopted a strategy of doing the opposite of every instinct he had. While Republicans usually stand for small government, and Democrats energetically use government to protect the vulnerable from marginalization and injustice, both parties tend to “do the opposite” when it comes to abortion.

Evidence appears to show, for example, that Republicans play on the concerns for prenatal children by claiming to stand for a big government that will regulate the intimately private and personal reproductive practices of women. And the evidence also appears to show that Democrats play on the concerns of many for women’s rights by claiming to stand for privacy and freedom of the individual over and against the government’s interest in protecting the vulnerable.

The Costanza strategy also describes the political reaction

to abortion laws in Europe. Conservatives, who often criticize attempts to use Europe as a model for social issues, are pushing our abortion laws to be more like those in France and Sweden. Liberals, who often evoke Europe as a place of social progress, imagine such changes to be moving backward. But the reality is that we are slowly becoming more like Europe when it comes to abortion restrictions. Though there is no serious attempt to make abortion totally illegal, dozens of bills have passed in recent years that significantly restrict abortion. Here are just a few:

- Thirty-three states have passed laws requiring informed consent (24 include a requirement for an ultrasound).
- Thirty-one states have passed abortion clinic regulations.
- Thirty-eight states have passed rules on parental notification or involvement.
- Thirty-eight states have wrongful-death laws that treat the unborn child as a person; 11 of these protect the fetus from fertilization onward. Thirty-seven states have fetal homicide laws, and 25 of these extend the protection from fertilization.
- Virtually every state today has prenatal-injury laws that compensate for prenatal injury at any time after conception.
- With the passage of the previously mentioned Texas law, Texas became the 13th state to ban abortion beyond 20 weeks.

The trend shows no signs of slowing. The year 2013 saw the second highest number of pro-life state laws passed in American history (2011 holds the record). There are many more in the pipeline. One of the few attempts to change the law in the *other* direction was defeated in New York State in June 2013, when both Republican and Democratic legislators rejected Governor Andrew Cuomo’s attempt to expand access to late-term abortion.

So there’s been a broad and dramatic shift, especially in the last 15 to 20 years, toward more abortion restrictions in the United

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AP Photo / Pablo Martinez Monsivais

States. This trend toward European-style restrictions will almost certainly continue for at least another generation.

**T**he laws mentioned above continue to be passed by legislatures because they have the support of the people. But our abortion *practices* remain out of step with what most Americans believe is acceptable:

- Sixty-two percent believe that abortion should be legal in “few” or “no” circumstances.
- Forty-two percent believe that abortion should be illegal except in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the life of the mother; 10 percent believe that it should be illegal without exception.
- Sixty-one percent believe abortion should be legal in the first trimester, 27 percent in the second trimester, 14 percent in the third trimester.

Contrast this with abortion practices in the United States:

- Thirty-three percent of women will have an abortion in their lifetimes.
- Every year 1.2 million abortions are performed.
- Twenty percent of pregnancies end in abortion (40 percent in New York City).
- Ninety percent of fetuses diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted.
- One hundred and twenty thousand abortions are performed in the second and third trimesters.

Our political parties are using the Costanza strategy in order to raise money and turn out their base. Their stated views on abortion run counter to their core political beliefs—so it is hardly surprising that neither party has done much to change the federal abortion law.

But it will not stay this way forever; eventually the will of the people will be reflected in public policy. This seems unde-

niable, especially when we think about the coveted voters of the next generation: Hispanics, millennials, and women. Hispanics are now the majority ethnicity in California; Texas will soon follow, along with much of the rest of the country. Though Hispanics disproportionately vote Democrat, they are not reliable pro-choice voters. Far from it. As Victoria M. DeFrancesco Soto, a physician appearing on *NBC Latino*, noted, “On the issue of abortion Latinos are significantly more pro-life than non-Latinos.” For instance, Hispanics are 10 percent more likely than whites to think that abortion should be made broadly illegal. Soto also noted that Latino opposition to abortion changes little whether Latinos identify as Democratic, Republican, or independent. As Hispanics assume more positions in the power structures of the United States, abortion politics will change dramatically.

Yet the most obvious way that the electorate will shift will come from the rise of the millennials. It’s well known that young people are trending pro-life, and that this was the primary reason for the 2013 resignation of NARAL’s 61-year-old president, Nancy Keenan. This issue has been on the radar screen of pro-choicers since the appearance of Elizabeth Hayt’s 2003 *New York Times* article, “Surprise, Mom, I’m Against Abortion.” The trend was clear:

Fifty-four percent of 282,549 students polled at 437 schools last fall by the University of California at Los Angeles agreed that abortion should be legal. The figure was down from 67 percent a decade earlier.

A 2003 Gallup poll also found that over 70 percent of teenagers thought that abortion was “morally wrong.” In 2010, Gallup found that “support for making abortion illegal was growing fastest among young adults.” In 2012, only 37 percent of all millennials considered abortion to be morally acceptable.

During a debate in Texas and in the U.S. Congress about whether to ban abortion beyond a gestation period of 20 weeks, the *Washington Post* noted that among people who



were 50 or older, 44 percent supported such a ban; among those 18 to 29, 52 percent supported it.

This trend holds for young Catholics as well. A 2013 *New York Times* poll asked Catholics: "Should the next pope be for or against legalized abortion?" In the age group 45 to 64, only 49 percent said "against," but among those 18 to 44, that number rose to 58 percent. Pro-choice groups such as EMILY's List and NARAL are also worried about what they call the "intensity gap." Of young people who identify as pro-life, 51 percent claim that abortion is an important issue, but for young people who identify as pro-choice, that number plummets to 20 percent.

Finally, consider the politically all-important demographic of women. It is commonly assumed that women are the group most opposed to pro-life policies. But in the *Times* poll that asked whether the new pope should be for or against legalized abortion, 60 percent of women said "against" compared to only 52 percent of men. Fifty percent of women were for the 20-week ban, compared with only 43 percent of men. In a 2013 Pew Forum study, 49 percent of women said that having an abortion was morally acceptable, compared with 45 percent of men. Once again, the conventional wisdom on abortion is called into question by facts on the ground.

Two things are worth watching. The first is the Costanza strategies of the political parties. With the Internet and social media taking over political campaigns, it's unlikely that the party bosses will be able to hold on to power via political sleight of hand and, at times, outright dishonesty. This shift had happened to a certain extent already in 2009, with the rise of the pro-life Democrats and the passage of the Stupak Amendment. We are already starting to see a shift in the abortion debate toward "libertarian vs. nonlibertarian" rather than "Democrat vs. Republican." Those who are opposed to abortion will realize that they need pro-life Democrats, while the pro-choice movement will continue to enlist Republicans in their cause. The Costanza strategy won't last forever.

The other factor to keep in mind is that many believe that

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## Ritual

Holy Week and three buffleheads on the cold river  
practice the rite of baptism. Their preference:  
complete immersion. Again and again they duck  
and disappear into ice-cold darkness, then emerge, shaking  
a zillion stars from their feathers.

As if there is never enough  
purification, they plunge down deep and rise and dive  
and rise again.

The week winds down, down  
down toward Friday. Temple draperies are torn.  
Darkness enfolds the earth. The dead in their stone tombs  
have begun stirring as if, like the sun in the morning,  
they will rise.

Sarah Klassen

the pro-life laws that states are enacting are unconstitutional. In a May 2013 *New Yorker* article titled "The Abortion Issue Returns," legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin noted that a few of these laws have already been struck down by lower courts. The judges most often claimed that such laws posed an undue burden on women, something prohibited by *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Toobin notes that the holdover from that 1992 decision is Anthony Kennedy, who will likely be the swing vote in abortion cases. Would he uphold a state law with a 20-week (or earlier) ban? A law mandating ultrasounds? More abortion clinic regulations? It isn't clear that he thinks such laws are undue burdens.

Toobin points out that in *Gonzales v. Carhart* (2007), Kennedy upheld federal law against late-term abortions and reflected a very different sensibility than he did in *Casey*: "The State may use its regulatory power to bar certain procedures and substitute others, all in furtherance of its legitimate interests in regulating the medical profession in order to promote respect for life, including life of the unborn." What counted as an undue burden for him when he helped decide *Casey*, Toobin noted, looked very different to Kennedy 15 years later. What will it look like when these state laws come before the Supreme Court?

Given current trends, the positions of key future demographics, and the legal challenges on the horizon, the question is not *if* the national abortion policy will undergo a substantial change, but *when*. Though this view may favor pro-lifers, the longtime pro-choice activist Frances Kissling of Catholics for Choice has been saying something similar for years. In a 2011 *Washington Post* op-ed, she accused pro-choice activists of being out of touch with trends in the debate. She argued that the rhetoric of choice and freedom—especially when combined with the view that abortion is just like any other medical procedure—is losing the argument in American culture.

We can no longer pretend the fetus is invisible. . . . We must end the fiction that an abortion at 26 weeks is no different from one at six weeks. These are not compromises or mere strategic concessions, they are a necessary evolution. The positions we have taken up to now are inadequate for the questions of the 21st century. . . . The fetus is more visible than ever before, and the abortion-rights movement needs to accept its existence and its value. . . .

Abortion is not merely a medical matter, and there is an unintended coarseness to claiming that it is. We need to firmly and clearly reject post-viability abortions except in extreme cases. . . . Those kinds of regulations are not anti-woman or unduly invasive. They rightly protect all of our interests in women's health and fetal life.

When hardcore pro-choice activists like Frances Kissling suggest changes with which many pro-life activists are likely to agree, there is good reason to think that changes will happen. When we refuse to let the extremists rule the debate, we can see that Americans have a large amount of overlap in what they believe about abortion. We truly are on the cusp of a new moment for public discussion of abortion in the United States.





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# Guerrilla disability rock

by Jesse James DeConto

“ALL RIGHT, LEE,” murmurs a robotic voice. “If you’re ready, take it away.”

The voice comes from a laptop affixed to Sloan Meek’s wheelchair. The 26-year-old has cerebral palsy and cannot speak. His longtime live-in caregiver, Wendy Lincicome, spends hours asking him questions in order to craft short speeches like this one, an introduction to a worship song Meek wrote with Lee Anderson, one of his part-time aides. A microphone over Meek’s wheelchair captures the sound from the laptop speakers. It also captures his own voice, in those moments when it’s able to fight its way from a body that won’t cooperate with his brain.

The song is called “I Am for You.” At Durham Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, Amanda Diekman has just preached a sermon on God’s abundant love in the midst of suf-

**Though wheelchair-bound and voice-impaired, Meek’s language is music.**

fering. Now Anderson strums his guitar and sings: “I am the bread of life; when you’re hungry, I will fill you.”

For Meek to eat, Anderson and Lincicome have to place food in his mouth. These three, the Diekmans, and others live in Durham’s North Street Community, an intentional neighborhood of people with and without disabilities. Lincicome and Meek’s apartment there is outfitted with a harness on a ceiling track to move him from his bed to the bathroom and back again. To get him into the church this morning, volunteers installed portable metal wheelchair ramps on two separate sets of stairs.

Anderson reaches the song’s chorus, “I am for you! I am for you!” Meek, though he can’t articulate most of the words, joins in. It’s not singing exactly, or at least it’s not like any singing you’ve ever heard. It’s more like a moan that captures the melody’s dynamic movement without matching the notes or words precisely.

For the past couple of years, Meek has been on the circuit as a guest worship leader in Durham and Chapel Hill. “I Am for You” is his current big hit. Its title comes from a banner at a

community center run by Reality Ministries, a Christian nonprofit that fosters relationships among people with and without disabilities. (Disclosure: my wife works there.) The lyrics riff on short devotionals given by Reality staff and volunteers:

I am the light of the world,  
in the darkness, I am shining,  
in the darkness I will lead you,  
I am the good, good shepherd,  
from the thieves I will protect you,  
when you wander, I will seek you.

“The first time I heard Sloan and Lee do that song,” says Susan McSwain, executive director at Reality Ministries, “I thought in that moment, ‘What did I do to deserve to be a part of this?’” She finds Meek’s singing more meaningful than “the greatest opera singer on the stage. . . . Even though we can’t understand the words that he’s singing, he’s singing those words, I am absolutely sure of it.”

People are often moved to tears when they hear Meek groaning along with these words, and all they can see is that he’s stuck in a wheelchair and can’t get the words out. They don’t even know that he’s blind and has frequent, life-threatening seizures. They don’t know that he was in and out of a coma for four months at age 14, nor that most people with his condition are gone by age 20.

Three years ago, doctors misdiagnosed a case of pancreatitis. It was months before Meek finally got the treatment that helped his digestion, and he ended up with a pressure sore and a bone infection that might never heal. “He will always be on antibiotics,” says his mother, Suzanne. “There’s nothing else we can do. They’re going to stop working at some point. People have no idea how really, really sick he is, but he’s a warrior.”

The words that sound from Meek’s speech software come from other people. He can’t say exactly what he feels, nor what “I Am for You” means to him. But when he sings his whole body writhes, like he’s trying to force the lyrics out. He smiles when you notice him, when you talk to him. He groans, seemingly in agreement, when someone talks about love, or Jesus, or the dignity of people with disabilities. When he sits by himself,

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**A JOYFUL SOUND:** Sloan Meek (right) and guitarist Noah Goyette form the duo of Meek Noise.

he looks tired, bored—though his family and friends say he hears everything around him. It's as if he perceives the world around him clearly, but the world doesn't know it.

In 1999, the Special Olympics World Summer Games were held in Raleigh, and Meek was featured in a video. He was 11 and wore a green bandanna around his neck as he sat in his wheelchair. "People don't know that I'm really cool," he said, his synthetic voice then that of a child's. "They don't get it that I'm talking to them, but not with their regular language. I'm showing them my own. They think I won't understand if they talk back to me."

Meek's language has long been music. Lacking eyesight or speech, he relates to people through hearing. When he was an infant, before his diagnosis, Suzanne noticed him trying to shout along as she sang. By the time he was 18 months old, Meek had figured out that he could get his mother to play his favorite jazz fusion album by refusing to do his physical therapy until she did. Home movies show Meek as a toddler banging on a plastic xylophone and singing along while James Taylor performed on Sesame Street. "He's pretty much been obsessed with music since he was ten months old," Suzanne says.

Another home video finds him sitting on one aunt's lap as another aunt plays piano and the family sings "Angels We Have Heard on High." The song's "Glorias" are the sort of simple, swelling lyrics that invite Meek's voice—much like "I Am for You" or Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," another favorite of Meek's. Long, sustained notes give his voice a chance to resonate with another's.

"There are times when our voices will blend together," says

Anderson, "and you can't tell whose voice is whose, just like any good harmony." As a religion student at UNC-Chapel Hill, Anderson volunteered as Meek's "buddy" at Reality's Tuesday night gatherings.

"When the music started, I just knelt down next to him, and we just started singing," says Anderson. "I don't want to romanticize disability too much or over-spiritualize it, but I remember thinking, man, that must be such a beautiful sound to God." Before Anderson became one of Meek's paid respite workers, the two sang together—and Anderson began to see how he might write a song for his friend to sing.

"Externally, it probably looks like I was just writing the song," Anderson says. "But we were there together. I wouldn't have written the song without Sloan. I've sung with him enough that I know where he likes to hang out, likes to dig in. We were physically together as the song was happening. It felt like we were doing something together. I know that he's a creative soul. When you're in a creative space with another creative person, it's one of those things I can't really put my finger on."

Reality Ministries grew from the ashes of conflict. In 2007, theological differences led to the entire Durham-Chapel Hill staff of the evangelical group Young Life being fired or resigning. Jeff McSwain—Susan's husband—was the leader, and he had been promoting what he called the "Gospel of All-Along Belonging," the idea that Christian conversion can come after acceptance into a community of grace, not only before. The group had already been building a ministry for people with disabilities, so it formed Reality to focus on this work. The goal was to blur the lines between servants and served by spotlighting the image of God in each participant.



Around that same time, Meek moved into Lincicome's home in Durham, funded by a Medicaid program that helps keep people with disabilities out of more institutional settings. Lincicome had worked as Meek's part-time caregiver for five years of his childhood. Later he lived in a group home, and Lincicome acted as a big sister, visiting him and going along on family vacations. It took three years for her to secure funding to foster him in her home, but now Medicaid provides not only her salary but also respite-care pay for Anderson.

It also allows for a "community networking" budget. This enables Noah Goyette, who met Meek while working at his group home, to take him out into Durham to do volunteer work. "He loves music; he loves socializing; he loves food," says Goyette, a social work student and a musician. "He wants to be surrounded by compassionate, open-minded, enthusiastic people. . . . We were looking to make his life outside his home to really be about him. I was able to be his sidekick in his whole new life."

**M**eek began to find his voice as a performer at an annual Reality talent show in 2008. He read an "Ode to Reality" he had written, naming many of the friends he had met there and all the gifts they bring. One of his closing lines signaled what was to come: "My favorite thing is when we sing." A year later, he and Goyette sang the Beatles' "Let It Be" from that stage.

"At Reality, he never worries if he can do it or not. He goes for it," Lincicome says. "He's just confident to be himself and to get up on a stage and perform. He knows that with everyone

around him, he's going to get a standing ovation from all his friends."

In turn, Meek has become an ambassador for Reality, singing in local churches and at events at Duke Divinity School and elsewhere. Alex Furriness, a 22-year-old North Street neighbor with Down syndrome, sometimes travels with Meek and Anderson as a sort of roadie. Meek also met his girlfriend Janie Desmond at the Reality Center six years ago. Desmond has a milder case of cerebral palsy and is able to attend the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, but she has lived in the North Street Community during school breaks.

"We all get by with a little help from our friends," says Meek, in one of his prerecorded speeches for Durham high school students. "I love living my big dream of being a rock star."

Anderson's father Fil, a longtime Young Life colleague of the McSwains, heard "I Am for You" for the first time at Meek's birthday party last year. "I just thought, oh, this is dreadful," he says. But soon "it became in a way the most beautiful music I've ever heard. People have always known it's a good thing to help people with special needs. But it's terribly sad to me that when the stories of Jesus are told, there doesn't seem to be a consideration that maybe Jesus was getting something out of the relationships, too. To me it's inescapable: everyone has gifts to offer. It thrills me to see [Meek] being my son's teacher."

Twice a week, Meek and Goyette play music at the Durham Center for Senior Life. On a recent afternoon, Meek sat near the eight-foot windows at one end of a sunlit game room. Elderly men and women encircled a half dozen round tables, playing cards or checkers, doing puzzles, knitting, or flirting. Next to Meek was Goyette, who sees himself as "a combination of Alfred and Robin to Sloan's Batman."

They call the duo Meek Noise. In other contexts, their repertoire can be pretty noisy. Some Duke engineering students outfitted Meek's wheelchair with clamps to hold a guitar or keyboard. Goyette puts a guitar in open tuning, a traditional technique that allows a chord to be played with just the strumming hand. Meek lacks the dexterity to play melodies or form chords in standard tuning, but he can strum. Anderson has likewise reprogrammed the pitches of the keys on a keyboard so that there are no dissonant notes. "It often ends up being quite beautiful," says Goyette.

Sometimes Goyette, who is most comfortable as a drummer, places a small drum kit on the sidewalk, and Meek bangs along on the guitar. "He could just make all this crazy musical racket," Goyette says. "It probably looks like guerrilla disabilities rock." In that setting, with people walking by but no one really paying much attention, Meek's voice might drone along to an experimental rhythm or a loud rock song. "He can really belt, and I so want to take advantage of it," Goyette says. But Meek is a bit shy about doing this in front of an actual audience.

And so Meek Noise treats the senior center's captive audience instead to gentler Americana and Motown hits. Goyette sings and plays guitar, relying on his laptop for lyrics and chords; Meek cries out when it feels right. After the first set on this particular afternoon, Ernest Collins—a man built like a defensive end—approached the baby grand piano 20 feet from

## Disposal of the body

So Jesus' wealthy friends did prove useful in the end.  
All four narratives seem to agree on this.  
Joseph, after all—the one from Arimathea, not his Dad—  
Joseph pulled strings with Pilate. Did he have to call in  
a few favors earned in questionable ways  
so he could claim possession of the corpse?  
Old Nicodemus too, Jesus' night-shift friend from the Sanhedrin,  
Nicodemus makes his own fleeting reprise,  
carting along a ton—almost—of fragrant spices,  
nard and myrrh (again!), for preservation purposes.  
Although where he got such pricey stuff,  
late on a holiday Friday afternoon, is never quite explained.  
And that convenient, fresh-hewn, garden tomb;  
even back in the day, sepulchres such as those  
did not come ten-a-penny! Add in all the hired help  
they must have needed to get stuff from here to there  
and, of course, to roll and seal that massive rock . . .  
Whole thing makes you wonder—doesn't it?—  
wonder if that narrow needle's eye got prized wide open—  
camel-size, at least—to accommodate these late allies.

**J. Barrie Shepherd**



where the guys were sitting. “Do you know any standards?” he asked.

After a few misses, he and Goyette settled on Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World.” Collins played a bass line with his left hand and arpeggios with his right while crooning the melody, like he’d been performing the song for 50 years—which he has. One of the women got up and joined the singing. At the song’s end, Collins launched right into “Fly Me to the Moon.” Goyette struggled through these songs he had not practiced, strumming along as best he could.

## Meek is an ambassador for Reality Ministries.

“Everyone’s always really supportive,” he says. “We really are just sharing our friendship. We’re sharing the joy of music. The seniors clearly love having Sloan there and knowing he’s going to be there.”

After Collins left the piano, Meek used his head to control a joystick connected to his laptop, scrolling through a list of songs he and Goyette had prepared. When he reached his choice, he pressed what looks like the Staples big red “Easy” button with his hand.

“Milkman of Human Kindness,” spoke the robotic voice,

indicating a Billy Bragg song. “This is a song about being helpful and loving,” the computer announced. “I hope you like it.” Meek was worn out by then, but he contributed some “ba-ba-bahs” to the last chorus.

Next Meek chose the song “The Rotting Strip,” by Crooked Fingers, a local band. Goyette felt a little sheepish. “It’s a song about a drunk and a prostitute,” he said quietly. But it also gave him a chance to point out that he plays the two songs with his capo—a device that changes a guitar’s pitch—in the same position. Meek was giving him an easy segue. “I feel like he really added it up,” said Goyette. “It shows his knowledge of music.”

When the set concluded, Goyette packed up and then pushed Meek’s wheelchair toward the elevator. They couldn’t get past Marjorie Young, who wore a pink flower in her long gray hair as she knitted a blanket for a friend’s great grandchild. “Let me call you sweetheart,” Young sang to Meek, “I’m in love . . . with . . . you!”

“He’s my sweetheart,” she told Goyette.

Back at Durham Presbyterian, after Meek and Anderson sing “I Am for You,” the service moves into a time of prayer. The congregation names individual requests, then they recite the Lord’s Prayer. Meek starts his recorded version a bit late. “Deliver us from evil,” says the lone virtual voice, after a hundred other voices have finished the prayer. “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”

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# Holy terror

by Philip Jenkins

READERS MIGHT DISAGREE with Karen Armstrong's specific arguments, but never has she been faulted for lack of scholarly ambition. The author of *A History of God* (among many other books) regularly tackles massive topics of pressing significance, ranging freely over the millennia and across continents. Her willingness to paint on a very large canvas is abundantly evident in *Fields of Blood*, which traces the age-old relationship between religion and violence.

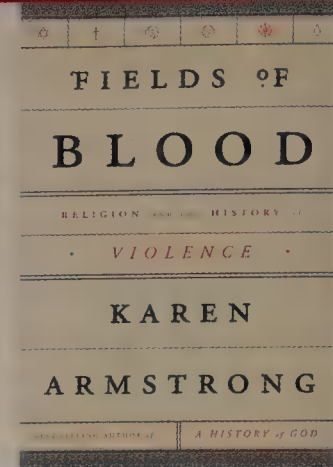
Discussing that connection is timely in an era when so many acts of terrorism and warfare are credited to faith. From Voltaire to Richard Dawkins, that linkage has provided a potent rhetorical weapon to atheists and secularists attacking religion. Obviously, say such critics, religion has throughout history sparked wars and driven persecutions, and it will continue to do so until humanity evolves beyond its childish mythologies.

To visualize the antireligion argument, we might think of a video showing the World Trade Center in flames to the accompaniment of John Lennon's song "Imagine": "Imagine no religion. . . . Nothing to kill or die for." Movements like the one behind the so-called Islamic State demonstrate to many people that a world without God would be more peaceful, as it would be a world with fewer reasons to hate. If you are fighting for God against the devil, the argument goes, then there can be no peace short of annihilating the enemy.

Armstrong flatly rejects such easy equations. She admits that wars have often been framed in terms of faith and that none of the world's religions can boast of clean hands in this regard. But she places the primary blame for violence on changing social and economic circumstances, which create larger and more aggressive political entities, commonly headed by warrior elites and dynasties. Armstrong sees a Darwinian pattern: lands with less determined and less confident elites are rapidly swallowed up by their harder-edged neighbors. For multiple reasons, ancient and medieval states sponsored and supported official faiths, which channeled and consecrated warrior ideals. All religions do this to varying degrees.

To oversimplify Armstrong's argument: states happen, wars happen, and religion blesses them. Religion thus provides a rhetorical framework for warfare—but not, she argues, the motivation.

We should not imagine a feudal lord sitting quietly by his fireside until some sackcloth-clad religious fanatic, shrieking threats of hellfire, induces him to launch an attack on his less



## Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence

By Karen Armstrong  
Knopf, 528 pp., \$30.00

pious neighbor. Very probably something like the Arab conquest of the Middle East would have occurred in the seventh century even without the rise of Islam. Justification is not causation.

We blame religion for such acts because in many early societies scholarship and learning tended to be the preserve of religious institutions. Wars and state actions were thus recorded

## Can "religion" be separated from surrounding economic and social forces?

and lauded by faith-driven scribes, who wasted no opportunity to stress their underlying religious motives and to exaggerate those retroactively. Religions are much to blame for shaping our later image of such early struggles, but they did not actually cause the violence.

Moreover, the state's alliance with religion is a complex matter: it is difficult to avoid the obvious medieval metaphor of the double-edged sword. While faith sanctifies warfare and military values, societies imbued by religious values tend over time to be more influenced by their humanitarian and nonviolent ideals.

The scope of *Fields of Blood* is impressive, including substantial case studies from India, China, and Japan, as well as more obvious examples from Christendom and the Islamic world. Particularly valuable is the book's long historical span, which allows the reader to trace not just the early history of warrior faith in such societies but also its evolution in modern times. Armstrong shows, for instance, how modern-day religious extremists in the Hindu and Muslim worlds have

Philip Jenkins is author of *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (HarperOne).



grounded their actions (often implausibly) in the imagined history of ancient warriors.

That long historical reach allows Armstrong to argue very convincingly against some modern clichés about religious violence. Most powerfully, she shows beyond debate that in modern times no religion has done nearly as much as secular ideologies have to foster violence. And most of those ideologies (above all, communism) have themselves been aggressively materialistic and antireligious. This fact is, or should be, so obvious—and the scale of the savagery so starkly evident—as to end once and for all the canard that faith causes violence. As she argues, religion has become a scapegoat for contemporary explanations of violence, cited most frequently by the historically impaired.

More controversially, Armstrong's readers will have a hard time arguing for the inherently violent nature of any one faith, a charge that in modern times attaches particularly to Islam. She knows a great deal about Islam and writes at length about some of its uglier modern manifestations, but argues that modern-day extremism must be understood in the context of contemporary social and political strains rather than any supposed toxins

in Islam's DNA. Religions develop according to complex historical circumstances, rather than being circumscribed by their founding scriptures.

If Islam is uniquely conducive to producing acts of terrorism, it is odd that Muslims were such latecomers to the world of 20th-century terrorism, a landscape already thoroughly charted by fascists, nihilists, anarchists, communists, and miscellaneous nationalists. Nationalism, in fact, receives here much of the blame for acts commonly characterized as religious.

Readers will also learn how all faiths have been thoroughly adept at deploying scriptures to justify mayhem and massacre



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over the centuries. The Bible itself has repeatedly been used for such purposes in particular political settings, and that is exactly Armstrong's point: it is the settings that drive the violence, not the texts themselves, nor the associated doctrines. Nothing in the Qur'an itself can be directly blamed for contemporary Islamic extremism.

I cannot imagine anyone who would fail to find new information or insights in *Fields of Blood*, which makes nonsense of so many antireligious rants. Yet precisely because it stakes claims in so many different areas—that it operates in so many fields—it inevitably arouses some disagreement.

For example, Armstrong rightly stresses that we should be careful about defining the limits of “religion” in most societies up to very modern times, or in drawing too sharp a line between categories such as social, economic, and spiritual. It is difficult to blame a particular act on “religion” when religion was scarcely recognized as a separate sphere of life until at least 1700. If everything is broadly religious, then we cannot single out religious motives for something like the Spanish Inquisition, which should really be understood in terms of political stresses.

Yet we could turn that argument on its head. Yes, we might say, a particular massacre or persecution was really driven by crop failures and popular despair rather than by religious doctrine. But does that mean that it was not in some broad sense also religious?

Throughout history, most people have accepted broadly providential views of the world. They believed that wrong conduct or heretical belief stirred God to anger and that such anger would be expressed in highly material terms—in earthquake and fire, invasion and military defeat, famine and pestilence. Unless evildoers or wrong-believers were suppressed, society might perish altogether. In order to destroy malevolent groups, activists took steps that look worldly, political, and cynical, but we can never truly separate those political steps from their compelling underlying motivation, which was supernatural—understood according to the faith prevailing at the time in question.

---

## Ephesus

I was in love with God for one afternoon.  
Twenty, alone on a beach, I dropped rocks  
by the edge and watched the ocean wash  
gray into blue, brown into red. An hour  
of my crunching steps, the clack of pebbles,  
the water's rippling response. Never mind  
invisibility. We were the only ones, and I  
so intoxicating—sand-blown hair,  
denim cut-offs, no reason to believe  
anyone's faith could dissolve. My prayers  
were as certain as the stones I threw,  
the answers as sure as the cove's blue floor.

**Tania Runyan**

Religion is a very broad tent, which is not just confined to institutions and isms. I actually have no problem in seeing something like the Inquisition as a thoroughly religious affair in this broad sense of the term, as well as a specifically church-oriented one.

In analyzing modern times, again Armstrong protests too much. She tries too hard to explain away the religious character of events and movements that most observers would certainly categorize in religious terms. Repeatedly, she urges us to see the social, economic, and political contexts at work in particular situations, and she is certainly correct to do so. But that

## Armstrong tries too hard to explain away the religious aspect of violence.

wider understanding does not, or should not, allow us to remove the religious context or to see the religious rhetoric and symbolism as mere window dressing.

Even if a given movement is thoroughly shaped by political and social circumstances, we cannot ignore the religious quality through which it expresses its beliefs, not least because an authentic believer will see the hand of God at work in both politics and society. No, religion is not the sole culprit for contemporary global mayhem. But neither can it be exonerated.

We can draw up lengthy lists of the circumstances that drive a young Arab citizen of France to travel to Syria and become a suicide bomber. We can identify the racism, deprivation, and lack of educational opportunity that shaped his life. The fact remains that the identity he acquires is religious, and religion provides the lens through which he sees his sufferings as the result of an infidel West that rejects Islam. His subsequent actions must be understood as religiously motivated and defined according to the traditions of one particular faith. He is engaged in religious violence, and it is silly to pretend otherwise.

A similar point might be made about the many modern incidents of bloodthirsty conflict between communities that define themselves in religious terms. Armstrong has little sympathy, for instance, for any attempt to invoke religious motivations for the appalling conflict between Hindus and Muslims during the partition of India in the 1940s, and to some extent, she is right. If you had interrogated a homicidal Islamic militant (say) about the core beliefs of his faith, he might have proved thoroughly ignorant, making it hard to view him as an authentic jihadi warrior. In the place of religious faith, she invokes another demon figure: “Muslims and Hindus would both fall prey to the besetting sin of secular nationalism: its inability to tolerate minorities.”

But would the same militant have been any better informed about the details of secular nationalist ideology, beyond a generalized hatred of those who dressed and ate differently? Armstrong scapegoats secular nationalism in very



much the same way that other critics blame religion for any and all atrocities.

I personally am less skeptical of the specifically religious claims of communities engaged in such violence, but not, of course, because indiscriminate warfare belongs to the belief system of any of the great faiths. Rather, the fact that communities define themselves thus—as Hindu, or Catholic, or Buddhist—genuinely does mean that they have through the centuries been molded by those values and traditions, however much they have transformed and secularized them. To adapt Emerson's words, that spiritual past had baked their loaf.

When Indians in the 1940s committed acts of hatred in the name of Ram or Allah, we should at least respect the history that had driven them to such an intolerant and xenophobic identification, even as we utterly condemn the crimes themselves. Religious wars have occurred in the past and still happen today. The last person who will fight and die in such a religious struggle has not yet been born.

Armstrong is at her weakest in addressing very recent times, when her attempts to underplay religion's role in violence become deeply unconvincing and overtly polemical. At times, her repeated assertions that Islamic terrorism does not conform to true or normative Islam make her an apologist for that faith. Well, perhaps the terrorist acts are not "normative"; they still are incontestably driven by religious motives, which define themselves according to the traditions of Islam.

To take one example of many, Armstrong looks at the countless atrocities committed by Islamic terrorists over the past decade and comments that such freelance fighters "have very little knowledge of the Qur'an, and so it is

pointless to attempt a debate about their interpretation of scripture or to blame 'Islam' for their crimes." Her point about interpreting scripture is quite fair, but her comment about not blaming some version of Islam for these acts is grotesque.

A similar comment can be offered about her mischievous suggestion that the reaction of the U.S. government to the 9/11 attacks was just as religiously driven and fanatical as the ideologies that generated those attacks.

*Fields of Blood* has a terrific amount to offer virtually any reader. At times, though, history and polemic become difficult to distinguish. CC



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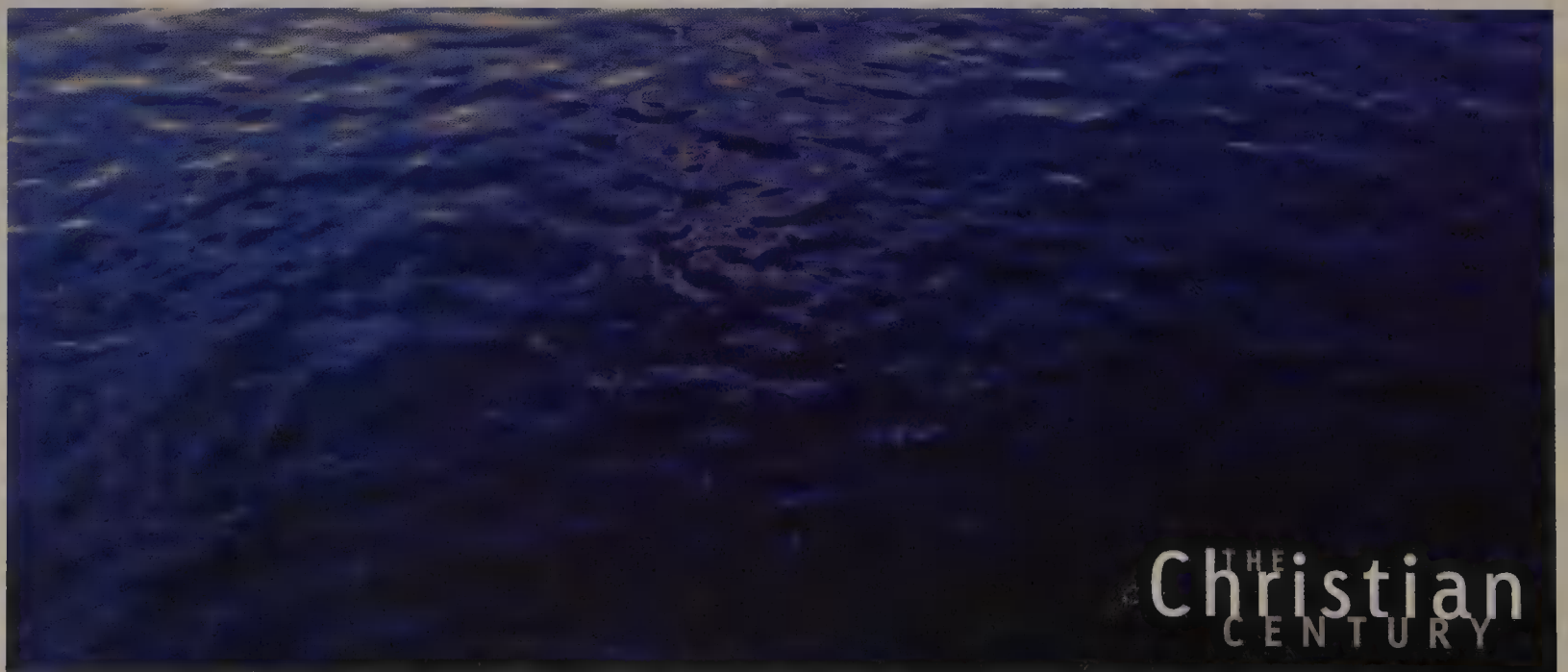


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*(from Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics)*



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by Samuel Wells

## Dementia and resurrection

**OUR CULTURE'S JUDGMENT** on dementia comes down to three words. The first is *deficit*. No one has a positive association or reaction in relation to dementia. It's all subtraction from regular life, all taking away, all negative. There's nothing good to say about it. It's a curse from a wicked fairy, and there's no magic wand to wave it away.

The second word is *decline*. For dementia the arrow only goes one way, from bad to worse. There are no recovery stories, no websites with breakthrough diets or amazing parent turn-arounds. It never gets better. It just goes downhill. It's a story of decline.

The third word, the one lurking in the back of every conversation about dementia, is *death*. Our society looks on dementia as a living death. Facing up to dementia as the sufferer or the patient is like grieving a bereavement. I've presided at funerals many times for those who've spent the last chapter of their life living with dementia. It's as if the family members have faced two losses. Often they're very confused about whether this second occasion is a release, because the dementia has seemed like a prison, and any way out of the prison, even death, must be a release. And it's not always clear if the release is for the sufferer or for the family.

Deficit, decline, and death sum up our culture's attitude to dementia. When a person and a family receive a diagnosis, that's what they're facing. Half the people in the world over 85 have some kind of dementia, so it's very common, yet it's become the repository for our society's deepest fears. In the light of these associations it's not surprising that the reflex is to hold tight, to try and avoid decline, to pull back from the abyss of deficit and death. It's an understandable reaction. Dementia seems to rid a person of everything that's of value: one's past, through the loss of memory; one's relationships, through the blurring of recognition; and one's dignity, through the diminishment of sense of self and self-care. Holding on through a struggle for memory often results in conflict, and for the caregiver it often results in exhaustion and guilt. (the lack of progress seems to require someone to be to blame).

I've found some insight into all of this in the first Greek word that I learned, the first-person verb *luo*. I quickly discovered that it means "I loose"—it's a particularly useful verb for those who're in the habit of tying up oxen or releasing mules.

But then comes the great day when you first pick up a copy of the New Testament in its original Greek. And then you enter a new world. You read the end of the raising of Lazarus story, and, as Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus says, "Unbind him

and let him go." Here the word *luo* means "unbind him" (turns out it's useful for more than oxen). You read the sonorous words of Ephesians, "He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," and discover that the word for "broken down" is our little friend *luo*. You look at the description of Jesus in the book of Revelation and read, "Him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood." There's *luo* again, busily freeing us from our sins.

Little *luo* makes an appearance at these and plenty of other moments in the New Testament. What all these moments have in common is that each one of them paints a picture of resurrection. Resurrection is the defeat of death, the reconciling of hostile parties, the raising from the tomb, the healing of the sick, the restoration of the outcast, and the forgiveness of sins. *Luo* starts off meaning loosing donkeys but ends up meaning all of these things.

### Maybe our loved ones are moving into something new.

I think *luo* has something important to teach us in the face of dementia. In the face of deficit, decline, and death we try hard to cling on. But the lesson of the little word *luo* is that maybe the path of resurrection lies in letting go. If death is starting now, maybe resurrection can start now too.

Perhaps it's only when we let go of who and what our loved one was that we can receive who they are now. Perhaps only when we find ways to enjoy who they are now can we reverse the deficit and the decline, because we stop assuming they're moving away from something good and start appreciating that they're moving into something new.

Dementia is not a living death. It's an invitation to see how we can remain the same person yet take on new and rather different characteristics. In that sense it's a training in resurrection, in which we shall be changed but still recognizably ourselves. Like resurrection, we can't experience it unless we find ways to let go, to let loose, to be released and forgiven. God welcomes us into eternal life not by keeping a tight hold on us but by letting us go. The challenge for us in dementia is to find ways that we can do the same.

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Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.



# IN Review

## Unjustifiable acts

by George Hunsinger

In early December, after months of behind-the-scenes wrangling and delay, the Senate Intelligence Committee under the direction of Senator Dianne Feinstein finally released its report on CIA torture in the form of a 525-page executive summary. (The full 6,000-page report—which took five years to complete, at a cost of \$40 million—is still being withheld from public view.) In the aftermath, four points are especially clear.

First, despite highly publicized claims to the contrary, according to internal CIA documents the U.S. practice of torture after 9/11 produced no actionable intelligence—not about Osama bin Laden, not about those who perpetrated the attack on the World Trade Center, not about anything. The torture was worse than unnecessary. It was counterproductive. It is also the best recruiting tool anti-U.S. terrorists have had.

Second, unlike the 1975–1976 Church Committee, which also investigated abuses by intelligence agencies, the Feinstein Committee makes no recommendations for reform. By contrast, a blistering *New York Times* editorial dated December 21, 2014, calls for prosecuting the architects of U.S. torture all the way up to the higher echelons of the Bush-Cheney White House. Impunity, notes the *Times*, only ensures that future torture by our government lurks in the shadows as a latent possibility.

Third, both political parties are complicit. The Republican Party (with honorable exceptions like Senator John McCain) openly embraces torture, and the Democratic Party (again with honorable exceptions like Senators Mark Udall and Ron Wyden) effectively condones it.

Neither party supports serious efforts toward accountability and reform. The CIA, unrepentant and unbowed, survives as perhaps the most powerful institution in the United States.

In a surprise move, as reported in the *Washington Post* on January 5, 2015, on her own initiative (that is, not through the committee), Senator Feinstein sent a letter to President Obama with a detailed list of recommendations. She proposes new legislation to close all torture loopholes, prohibit the CIA from holding detainees “beyond a short-term, transitory basis,” require timely International Red Cross access to all captured detainees, and reestablish the Army Field Manual as the standard for interrogations.

Although these proposals would make a difference, I wish I could be more optimistic about them. For example, Senator Feinstein fails to mention the notorious Appendix M in the Army Field Manual, which was recently singled out as a matter of grave concern by the United Nations Committee against Torture because of its loopholes allowing abuse.

Finally, more religious people support torture under Obama than they did under George W. Bush. The level of support for torture by Christians is staggering. Seventy-five percent of white nonevangelical Protestants, according to a recent *Washington Post*/ABC poll, believe CIA torture was justified. The numbers are only slightly lower for white evangelical Protestants and white Catholics. The lowest levels of support are found among those with no religion.

It is in this context that Rebecca Gordon’s book is required reading. She shows that CIA torture has tendrils stretching not only back to the Bush



### Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States

By Rebecca Gordon  
Oxford University Press, 240 pp., \$29.95

administration, but at least as far back as the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War; that every act of Congress designed to curtail torture down through the decades has fatally included loopholes; and that torture ultimately has little to do with obtaining information and much to do with extracting false confessions like those Colin Powell unwittingly used before the United Nations in February 2003 to justify the U.S. attack on Iraq.

Gordon shows that torture not only inflicts irreversible physical and psychological harm on the victims, who are often innocent of any crime, but also traumatizes many of the perpetrators. She indicates that every level of society is corrupted in the process: doctors who superintend the torture chambers, psychologists who perfect techniques of brutalization, jurists who specialize in loophole lawyering, journalists who disseminate propaganda for the abuses, and, not least, ordained pastors and their flocks who are conspicuous, like Christians in Nazi Germany, mainly by their guilty silence.

Gordon issues a wake-up call for whatever may remain of the American conscience, and especially of the American religious conscience. She rightly

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*George Hunsinger teaches systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and is the editor of Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out (Eerdmans).*



challenges the instrumentalist discourse that dominates so many of our public discussions about moral issues like torture. If torture is unspeakably immoral and illegal, then it cannot be meaningfully assessed in terms of cost-benefit analysis.

Gordon further argues that the virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre makes it possible to see that torture is not merely a matter of isolated acts but is rather a form of institutionalized state practice. Virtue ethics is therefore supposedly superior to duty-based ethics such as we associate with Kant.

At this higher theoretical level, I do not believe Gordon has made her case. She makes an original contribution in showing that torture can be seen as a debased social practice. At the same time, in a nearly instrumentalist argument of her own, she borders on claiming that torture is unacceptable primarily because it tends to make us morally vicious as individuals and as a society. The four cardinal virtues, she argues, are distorted. Courage is deformed into callousness, temperance into doing evil that good may come, prudence into illicit risk taking, and justice into institutionalized impunity. I think we can grant all this while still feeling that it does not get to the heart of why torture is wrong.

I believe torture is wrong because it desecrates the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Although I respect virtue ethics, I do not finally subscribe to it. I believe that torture, like rape, slavery, and genocide, is never justified. I do not think that my duty-based view of Christian ethics prevents me from seeing torture as an institutionalized state practice. It was this view that led me to found the National Religious Campaign Against Torture in 2006, and it is this same view that has sustained my human rights work ever since.

I wish all virtue ethicists were like Gordon, and I hope she can persuade more of them to join the cause. But I can see little practical value in claiming that one ethical approach is superior to another in condemning unspeakable evils like torture. What matters is increasing the tribe of its committed opponents, regardless of how they get there.

## The New Evangelical Social Engagement

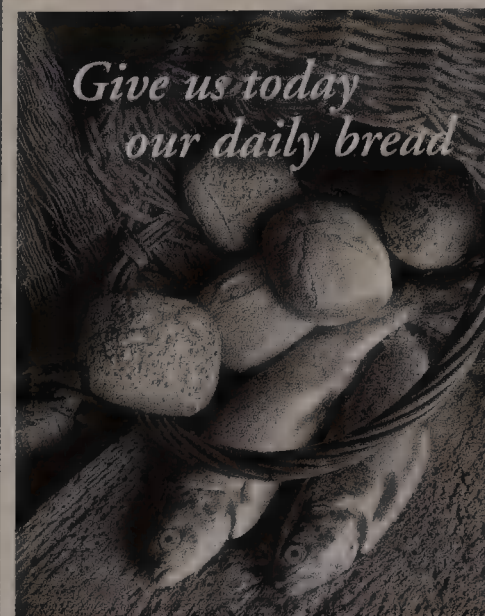
Edited by Brian Steensland and Philip Goff  
Oxford University Press, 336 pp.,  
\$29.95 paperback

Recently an academic friend whose views and worship practices meet all the usual criteria of evangelical told me he no longer owns the label. When I asked why, he answered simply, “When I tell people I am an evangelical, they automatically assume I want America to bomb Guatemala.”

This valuable anthology addresses a topic that usually flies under the media’s radar: “new” evangelicals’ progressive social engagement in the past quarter century. Other works, such as David R. Swartz’s *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, Brantley W. Gasaway’s *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, and Heather Curtis’s forthcoming *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*, tread some of this ground. *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, edited by distinguished scholars of American religion at Indiana University/Purdue University, amplifies these works with deeply researched historical and sociological case studies.

The chapters document the impressive range of new evangelicals’ efforts. Their endeavors include sustained attention to war, disease, racism, patriarchy, homelessness, hunger, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, environment, urban renewal, economic development, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, religious repression, and abortion on demand. In an elegantly crafted introduction, the editors place that work in historical context. The seeds of new evangelicals’ concerns appeared in 18th-century revivals, germinated in antebellum reform societies, flowered in midcentury abolitionism, and fully bloomed in perfectionistic crusades against many social abuses in the closing years of the 19th century. Though evangelicals never totally abandoned social reform, the middle decades of the 20th century saw fewer such efforts and occasional-

*Reviewed by Grant Wacker, who teaches Christian history at Duke Divinity School.*



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ly sharp criticism of them. Social reform purportedly distracted from the church's primary job of spreading the gospel.

By the 1970s, however, a small but vocal contingent of evangelicals were trying to reverse that trend and return the movement to the expansive social vision of the 19th century. Fifty leaders produced the landmark Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern in 1973. It addressed not only personal and social suffering but also the structural conditions that foster it. These voices remained through the 1980s and 1990s, but the cacophony of the religious right and the ensuing culture wars drowned them out, especially in the ears of the mainstream media. By the 1990s and 2000s, though, a new breed of evangelicals had joined the chorus. Insisting that authentic Christian faith must look out as well as up, these activists unhesitatingly coupled personal salvation with social justice. Though they were preponderantly young, white, urban, and highly educated, they found themselves united less by demographics, region,

or partisan political affiliation than by resistance to the religious right.

The contributors to this volume offer focused descriptions and analyses of different aspects of this new—or at least newish—evangelical social witness. James S. Bielo describes emerging evangelicals' resistance to epistemic modernism, megachurches, and church growth ideologies, in favor of simplicity, community, prayer, study, work, service, hospitality, justice, holiness, and celebration—all ideally centered in the local community. The fruits of collaboration mark the studies by John Schmalzbauer and Omri Elisha. Schmalzbauer focuses on the 2006 national meeting of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, where the prefix *multi* seemed the new byword: multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and multinational. Using Mike Huckabee's 2012 quip "We are all Catholics now" as a springboard, Elisha shows how new evangelicals drew inspiration from progressive Catholics, who share many of their concerns. Though he is careful not to claim causal linkages between

Catholic and new evangelical strategies, he traces affinities in their compassion efforts.

David R. Swartz shines light on new evangelicals' efforts to alleviate suffering internationally, especially their attention to HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, climate change, and unequal distribution of resources. The international reach of many NGOs claims the attention of Amy Reynolds and Stephen Offutt. Moving beyond disaster relief since the 1950s, such NGOs have increasingly turned to community building and long-term economic development. Will Samson explores the new monasticism, a widespread effort to find resources for personal, social, and material renewal at home, in grassroots settings, and often in communal living arrangements such as Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina.

Detailed fieldwork defines the chapters by Adriane Bilous and John C. Green. Bilous tracks the work of activist, millennial, evangelical women in New York City. Though many of these women avoid the label evangelical, they espouse

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a distinctly evangelical form of servant ministry, stressing volunteer work and mutual submission in place of patriarchy. Green presents a detailed demographic and political portrait of four distinguishable subgroups among the new evangelicals: populists as well as the traditional left, right, and center. The populists distinguish themselves by their engagement with “old issues” such as abortion and “new issues” such as human trafficking.

Environmental degradation and racial justice occupy chapters by Laurel Kearns and by Gerardo Marti and Michael O. Emerson. Kearns explores both liberal and conservative forms of green evangelicalism. The former, especially in the case of the Evangelical Environmental Network, emphasizes “creation care,” while the latter, as exemplified by the Cornwall Alliance, emphasizes “stewardship of creation.” Marti and Emerson consider new evangelicals’ efforts to prompt churches to diversify racially, especially by drawing on the advice of diversity experts. The authors chastise such experts for perpetuating stereotypes and ignoring larger issues of structural discrimination.

Finally, Daniel K. Williams traces new evangelicals’ “lonely” attempt to preserve unborn life in the context of the kinds of issues traditionally spearheaded by the secular left. New evangelicals’ solicitude for unborn life differs from the religious right’s allegedly similar concerns. The religious right cultivates criminalizing legislative solutions while appealing to culture war shibboleths. New evangelicals, in contrast, root their efforts in the “seamless garment” of a consistent pro-life ethic that challenges militarism and capital punishment and seeks expanded social services for families.

Reflections by historian Joel Carpenter, sociologist R. Stephen Warner, and the late ethicist Glen Harold Stassen wrap up the volume. Carpenter and Warner analyze the continuities and discontinuities between the older and newer forms of evangelical social witness, while Stassen’s commentary urges new evangelicals to find deep spiritual resources in his own Anabaptist tradition.

*The New Evangelical Social Engagement* offers a treasure of resources. Contributors discuss the work of movement pioneers such as Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw, *Christianity*

*Today* editor David Neff, and *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis. The endeavors of current leaders, such as New York City pastor Tim Keller and author Shane Claiborne, also receive extended treatment. Crucial statements like the 1973 Chicago Declaration, the 1994 Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation, and the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act win close scrutiny, too.

A number of themes recur. Perhaps the most conspicuous is new evangelicals’ refusal to be pegged politically. They all define their mission horizontally, as an effort to engage, reform, and redeem the external cultural, social, and natural environment, but they differ on the best political means for doing so. Also striking is how often new evangelicals have cooperated with Catholics and sometimes Jews as coworkers in their causes.

To be sure, ironies abound. The voluntary poverty that some new evangelicals practice is not the same as involuntary poverty, and skipping a meal is not the same as going without one. Many parti-

sans are acutely aware of those tensions even if they do not know how to resolve them. Women seem curiously absent from the leadership of a movement committed to repairing historic injustices. And many of the most salient social concerns of the era—immigration, imprisonment, obesity, substance abuse, and the humane treatment of animals—do not make the roster, at least in this study.

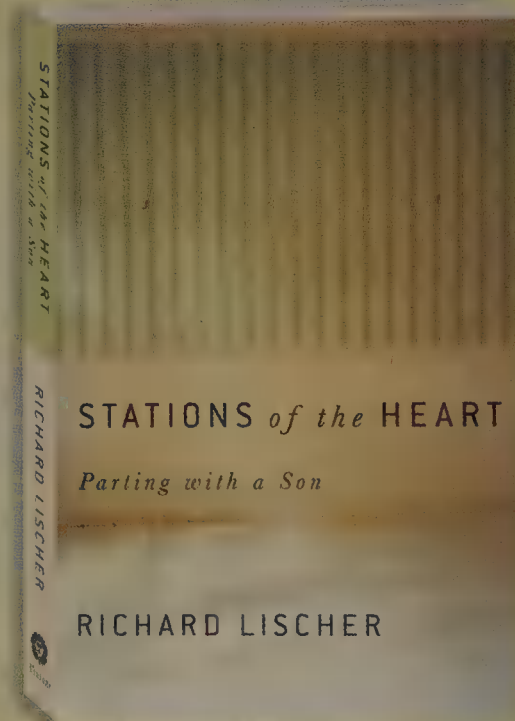
That being said, this timely volume offers a powerful corrective to the myth, pervasive in the media and among many academics, that all evangelicals are culture warriors. Evangelicals have much to account for, including foot-dragging on civil rights in the 1960s, perennial misogyny, and uncritical flag waving ever since World War II. But they also have much to be proud of. The massive presence of groups such as World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse—most recently on the front lines of the Ebola crisis in West Africa—are but two of countless cases in point. For millions of evangelicals, heaven above and heaven below are not so different after all.

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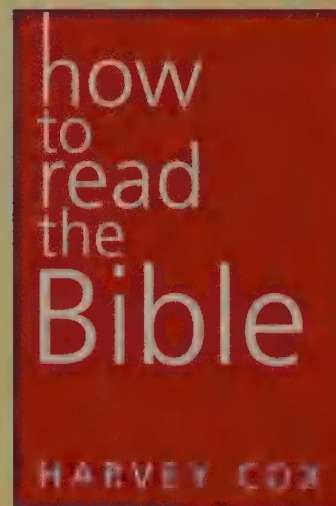
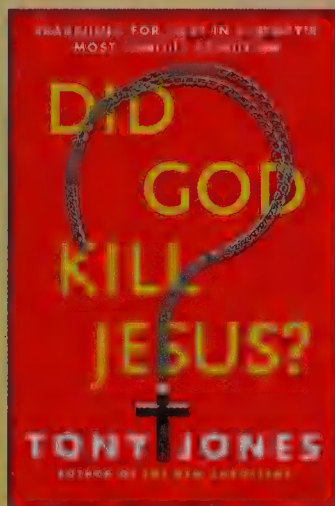
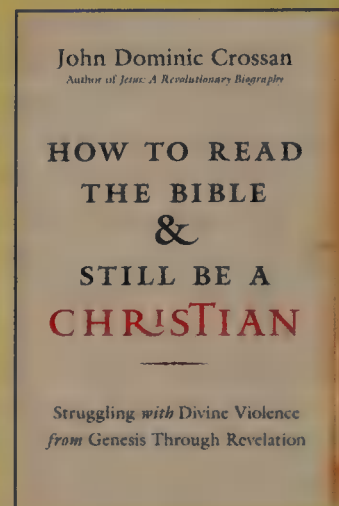
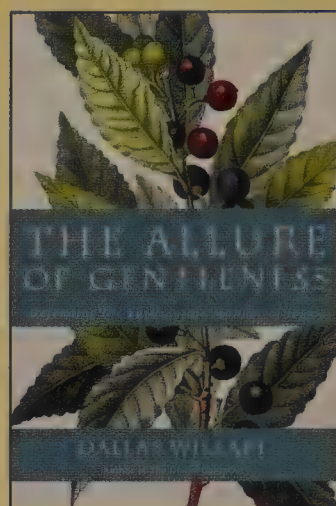
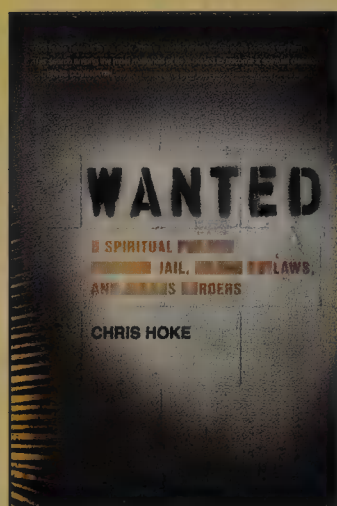
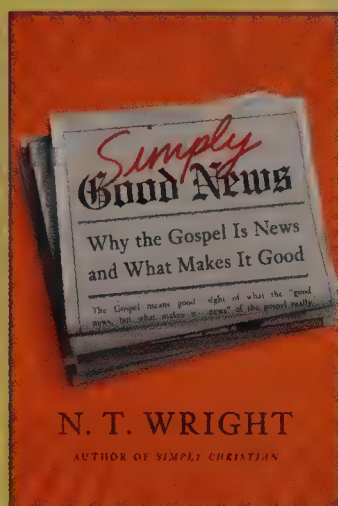


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## Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea

By Samuel L. Adams  
Westminster John Knox, 268 pp.,  
\$35.00 paperback

Samuel Adams of Union Seminary in Richmond has written a book that is important on two counts. First, he focuses on the historical period of the Second Temple, which stretches from the end of the Babylonian exile in 532 BCE to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE. This period features the formation and emergence of Judaism and the beginnings of the Christian movement. Until recently, little was known about the period, and critical scholars paid little attention to it because they had a generally credulous confidence in the early preexilic materials with their buoyant theological affirmations. This shift in scholarship is well reflected by Adams, though many readers may be playing catch-up with the newer focus.

The second reason the book is important is that Adams persistently asks economic questions rather than focusing on theological-spiritual matters to the neglect of material considerations—or imagining that texts can be understood apart from context. Adams's method is to follow the money. As he shows, neglecting economic matters probably means misunderstanding the text.

The subject that Adams pursues is not an easy one, because unlike theological statements in the text, economic matters are mostly hidden and must be pieced together by inference. A delight of the book is to watch Adams patiently connect the dots in fresh, suggestive, and credible ways.

In five substance-packed chapters Adams takes up issues of family life and marriage, work and financial exchange, the status of women and children, the role of the state, and the ethics of wealth and poverty. Concerning each topic he shows how deeply vested economic

interests crowd in on social relationships and assumptions, provoking dispute and conflict.


The most important specific insight is in his chapter on family life and marriage. He gives attention to Ezra's harsh measure of expelling from Israel "foreign wives" acquired during deportation. Commentators usually say that Ezra reflects a xenophobic propensity—a judgment that has fueled many Christian caricatures of Jews as a restrictive community. What Adams makes clear is that the breakup of those marriages was to protect the financial interests of elite Jews, lest marriage cause the transfer of wealth outside their privileged community.

The outcome of Ezra's action remains harsh, but in this light it takes on a different kind of credibility. The act of expulsion is more understandable when we remember that ancient society made no distinction between religious and secular concerns, so the act of expulsion was presented as one of religious fidelity. Any reader can factor in the way moneyed

families often worry about the loss of surplus wealth through "bad" marriages.


In his study of the status of women and children, Adams of course finds an androcentric order. He focuses, however, on indications of social stratification within the community. As a result, he is able to show that women and children of privilege had many more social opportunities than the great majority of the population, who labored in a hand-to-mouth existence. The conflict of class in Adams's study is of immense importance, for we now read in an acutely stratified society. Perhaps then as now, if someone called attention to stratification, those in the top stratum immediately accused them of inciting class warfare.

Two points of social analysis surface continually in Adams's perspective. On the one hand is the class distinction between the haves and the have-nots, or between urban elites and subsistence peasants. The narrative of Ruth becomes a study of class distinctions and the way in which a privileged and powerful man



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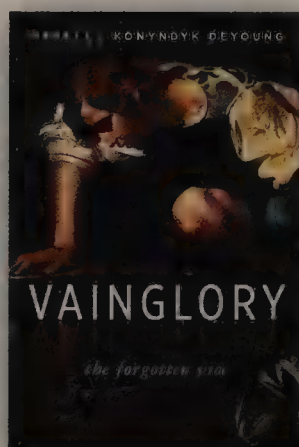
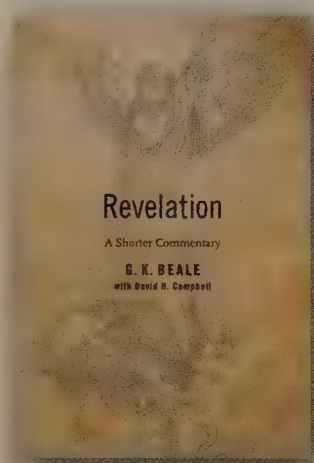
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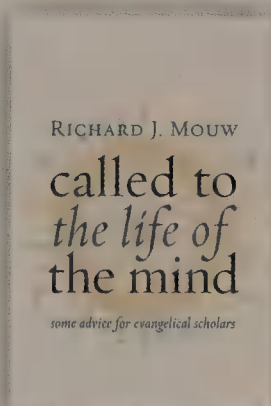
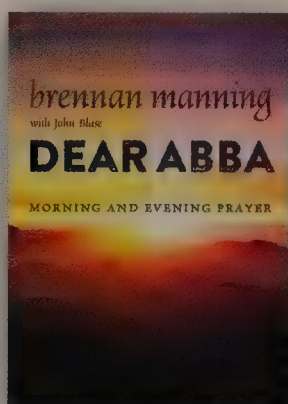
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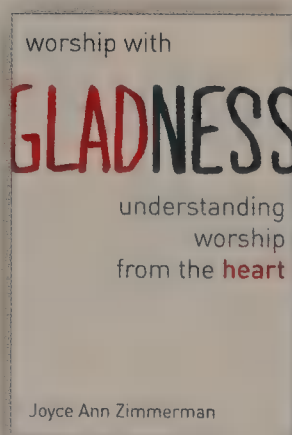
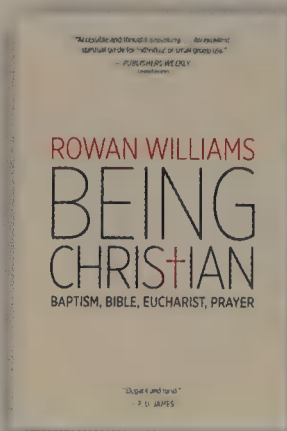
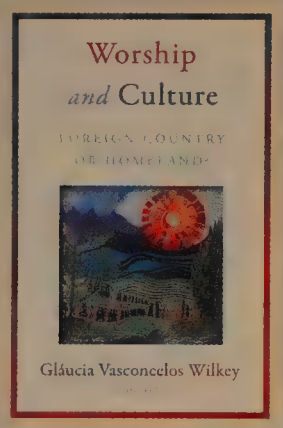
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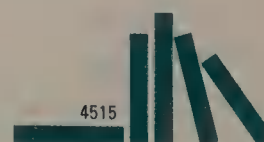
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like Boaz could choose to protect a vulnerable woman. The defining text, however, is Nehemiah 5, in which Nehemiah appeals to the Torah in his reprimand of elites who are taxing the majority into poverty. The agrarian life of the peasants was tenuous, always overshadowed by the prospect of land being seized by those who had resources and social power. That social arrangement permitted high-interest loans, a predecessor to payday loans.

Adams allows that an emphasis on YHWH as a “lover of justice” greatly resisted such exploitation, and, following Jacob Milgrom, he judges that the Jubilee was “a total reversal of the antichretic loan arrangements.” He is, however, very cautious about the historical reality of a Jubilee practice, noting that there is “no concrete evidence” that the Jubilee law became a reality, and judging it to be “more utopian than actual practice.”

On the other hand, the recurring social reality of Jewish life was imperial control

by a succession of great powers whose goal, predictably, was to extract revenue by means of taxation. The effectiveness of such taxation depended on cooperation between the foreign power and local authorities who had a privileged status as a result of such collusion. Specifically, the temple became a locale of political and economic power, and the temple priests enjoyed great advantage when they colluded with occupying powers.

Adams’s final chapter concerns the ethics of wealth and poverty, with attention to the wisdom traditions. He finds great ambiguity in the book of Proverbs concerning both the dangers of excessive reliance on wealth and the assurance of financial gains for those who obey Torah. Job and Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, offer mostly skepticism about economic matters. Adams does not venture far into the New Testament, but he notes how the Lucan author focuses on economics, promising heavenly rewards for struggling persons and eternal punishment for the wealthy.

## Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome

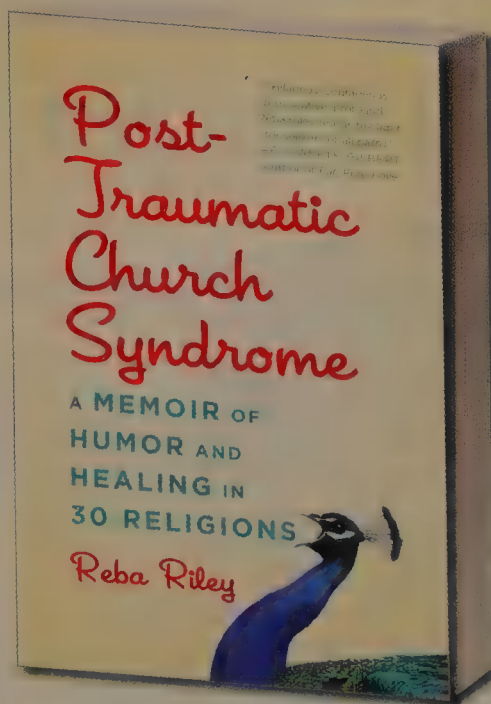
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This is a critical historical study. Nonetheless the book teems with contemporaneity. In its final pages Adams acknowledges that our complex economy is remote from that ancient small agrarian economy but says that “even with these contextual differences, there are more similarities than might appear at first.” He mentions various lending arrangements, including payday lending, and the demand for child labor. He concludes with two statements indicating that he has all along had one eye on his own interpretive context:

One consistent assertion in this regard is that God stands on the side of the most vulnerable members of society, even becoming their advocate. . . . We cannot fully understand the God they worshiped or the nature of their faith without also considering the economics of their time.

The book is a clear attestation that one does not need to appeal to Marxian categories to get at the question of economic justice in the Bible. Adams shows us what is in the text. In the face of our recurring predilection to misread the text in order not to “upset the faithful,” Adams provides a textual basis for more honesty and perhaps more courage.

## Faith and Wisdom in Science

By Tom McLeish

Oxford University Press, 304 pp., \$29.95

In 1959, C. P. Snow delivered a lecture called “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution.” The two cultures are the humanities and the sciences, and Snow claimed that it is a cultural problem that few people are literate in both. By the end of the 20th century, however, a new class of public intellectual had emerged, dubbed the “third culture” by John Brockman in his 1995 book of that title. These were top-shelf scientists, such as Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Pinker, who learned to communicate insights from their disciplines to the general public in ways that connected with the big existential questions about who we are and what our place in the universe is. With few exceptions these writers endorsed a naturalistic view of the world, according to which all the questions that matter can be answered by the sciences.

Other scientists recognized the limitations of science and did not pretend that it could answer all the questions we put to the universe. Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne did not achieve the fame of the third-culture writers, but they created the academic

discipline of science and theology. The next generation of scientists who have tried their hands at theology, whether professionally or more popularly, includes Alister McGrath, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Francis Collins.

What drives scientists to leave the laboratory and address the kinds of questions traditionally reserved for the humanities? This past summer I attended the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, the largest professional group of Christians in the sciences, and most of the presentations were theological or philosophical in nature. To be sure, they drew on the results and theories of the sciences, but primarily they aimed at interpreting scripture, examining presuppositions, or doing other kinds of philosophical work. Why would these scientists—most with no formal training in theology or philosophy—spend their research time and conference funds working outside their fields? To my mind, they are following the strategy of Augustine and Anselm: faith seeking understanding. They are committed Christians, and they are working out their faith in the context of modern science.

Another, not incompatible, answer to why scientists often turn to nonempirical questions is developed by Tom McLeish, a physics professor in the United Kingdom. In *Faith and Wisdom in Science*, McLeish argues for a deep commonality and kinship in the aims and motivations of science and of theology. They both draw deeply from the same wells: theology, not just science, engages with nature; and science, not just theology, pursues wisdom. Science was for a long time known as natural philosophy. *Philosophy*, the “love of wisdom,” was the appropriate word to describe the work of people like Robert Grosseteste, Robert Boyle, and even Gregory of Nyssa—Christians who saw nature as something more than a resource to be subdued and manipulated for their own ends. These thinkers recognized that wisdom could be drawn from an understanding of nature.

*Faith and Wisdom in Science* is a dif-

*Reviewed by J. B. Stump, who works for BioLogos, teaches philosophy at Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana, and coedited The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity.*

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ferent kind of science and religion book. This is partly because it comes from the United Kingdom, where the dialogue between the two cultures has a different tone. On the U.S. side of the Atlantic, the intersection of science and religion is typically understood as a war: Genesis, Galileo, and genetics are used as clubs to beat opponents into submission. Over there the tendency is to let science and religion do their own things. In that context, McLeish properly argues that theology and science need to be brought into more constructive dialogue. To this end, he encourages us to change the connecting word for the two disciplines from *and* to *of*, pointing us toward a theology *of* science and toward a middle ground where theology and science are neither competing with nor irrelevant to each other.

McLeish also contributes to what might be called a “turn to Job” and away from Genesis. Job is proving to be useful for biblical engagement with science, perhaps because its passages are less prone to be read as propositional claims and treated as scientific statements. McLeish and others see in the author of Job acute powers of observation of nature and an attitude of wonder that resonates with the scientific process. In fact, McLeish claims that the enterprise of science today stands in continuity with the biblical story going all the way back to these oldest meditations on creation.

It is not just because of its pedigree that science can be seen as a theological vocation. McLeish argues that Christianity is primarily about reconciliation—between God and humans, yes, but also between humani-

ty and nature. The biblical witness regularly juxtaposes the subjects of nature and suffering, but the good news is that suffering is not the intended or permanent condition. Contends McLeish: “When we do science, we participate in the healing work of the creator. When we understand a little more of nature, we take a step further in the reconciliation of a broken relationship.” This sounds like scientists may be priests for our culture. Yes! says McLeish. But because of the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, so is everyone else:

Scientists do indeed constitute, in this sense, a priesthood, but with no different status from the priesthood of factory workers, chefs, teachers, builders or carers. They simply have a special domain of healing and nurturing work to do, and this is on behalf of the rest of the community to whom they are accountable.

Worship and praise of the Creator is a proper human response to the natural world. It is also a proper and holy response for humans to examine nature closely and systematically. McLeish has provided some good, helpful, holistic thinking by a scientist about the place of science in our culture and in the church.

Scientists don’t have a monopoly on truth; nor should they be given an elevated and privileged role. But they can help us to see the natural world aright and participate in reimagining the natural world as God’s good creation. We’d all benefit from adopting the scientist’s attitude of wonder, which allows us to find wisdom wherever we look carefully enough.

## BookMarks

### Boswell’s Enlightenment

By Robert Zaretsky

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,  
288 pp., \$26.95

James Boswell, best known as Samuel Johnson’s biographer, was a lifelong seeker of truth. He struggled to put together his Calvinist religious heritage with the insights and perspectives of the Enlightenment. From 1763 to 1765 he toured Europe not just to see the historic sites but to encounter some of its greatest living thinkers, among them Rousseau and Voltaire. Zaretsky adroitly chronicles Boswell’s intellectual journey and introduces the reader to the varieties of 18th-century Enlightenment. Boswell’s struggles remain with us—over the relationship between faith and reason, the nature of human liberty and equality, the duties of citizenship, the role and limits of the state, and what constitutes the good life.

### The Thiselton Companion to Christian Theology

By Anthony C. Thiselton

Eerdmans, 884 pp., \$75.00

This doorstop of a reference book was written entirely by Thiselton, professor emeritus of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham. The single authorship has the advantage of yielding a consistent style, but compared to multi-author works, it lacks the expertise of specialists on the various topics. Most of the entries are quite short. However, there are a number of longer articles on key Christian loci: God, Christology, the Holy Spirit. Thiselton’s own area of expertise, hermeneutics, gets longer treatment as well. The book’s one great weakness is its lack of diversity. The theologians covered are largely white, male, and European or North American. Included is a useful chart listing key events and figures in the history of the church, again marked by lack of diversity, with a strong Western bias.

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## Transparent need

There are two ways in American media to introduce the viewing public to a minority group: you can present a member of the group as a “normal” and “respectable” member of the middle class (think of the gay couple Mitch and Cam on *Modern Family*) or as someone who’s asscrewed-up as any member of the human race. *Transparent* goes with option two.

*Transparent*, an original television series streaming on Amazon, follows the affluent, Jewish, Los Angeles-based Pfefferman clan as patriarch Mort transitions to being Maura (played in a mournful and tender key by Jeffrey Tambor). As Maura assumes her female identity and comes out to her children, the revelation of her secret drags a lifetime of other family secrets out into the light.

Eldest daughter Sarah (Amy Landecker) throws herself into an affair with her college girlfriend, whose existence she had hidden from her husband. Josh (Jay Duplass), the middle child and only son, reveals that he began sleeping with the family babysitter when he was 15. When he falls madly in love with two different women in a short period of time, his younger sister Ali calls his behavior a “love addiction.” Meanwhile Ali (Gaby Hoffmann) experiments with sex (the act) and gender (her self-presentation) with abandon, glee, terror, and confusion.

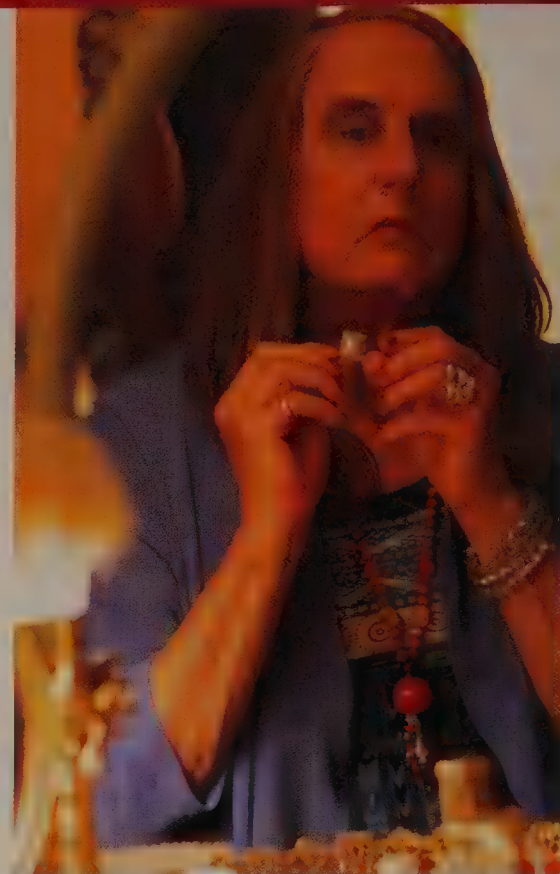
As the punning title suggests, the real issue at stake is not “trans-parent” Maura, but transparency. Secrets are the currency of the Pfefferman family. Maura, for example, doles out money and gifts to her children, then tells them not to tell each other. Her gender secret

radiates through the family and the family history, with series episodes revealing layers of self-deception and self-centeredness.

At first the viewer may think that a show about a bunch of confused and selfish Los Angelenos is not worth watching. The experience is like slowing down to gawk at a highway accident and then going home with the accident victims (or perpetrators?) for Shabbat dinner and more than a few glasses of wine. But the more time the viewer spends with these characters, the more they become full, individual human beings who are worthy of our time and attention however awkward or abominable some of their choices are.

*Transparent* is powerful as both the first show to focus on the topic of transgender transition and, as Emily Nussbaum wrote in the *New Yorker*, “the most Jewish show on television.” In fact, the “Jewishness” of the show is as surprising as the topic of transgender identity. Jewish jokes, idioms, and artifacts weave through the Pfeffermans’ lives. The most compelling—and least self-centered—character on the show is a young female rabbi who is actively engaged in ministry.

Family members both repudiate and long for religious rituals that will make sense of their lives. In a poignant and hilarious scene, the family sits down to Shabbat dinner because Sarah’s new girlfriend, Tammy (Melora Hardin), has read in *Real Simple* that “family rituals” provide tranquillity. Maura stumbles through her new role as matriarch, accidentally singing Passover songs.



**FAMILY SECRETS:** Mort (Jeffrey Tambor) transitions to Maura in *Transparent*.

In a later episode Ali remembers that when she was 13, her parents canceled her bat mitzvah at her request, with her dad (Mort) agreeing to respect her “inner wisdom.” Now, as an adult, she blames them for the decision.

“Who lets a 13-year-old make that kind of decision?” she rages. “Who needs Judaism? Who needs guidance? What on earth would I do with God?” Her anger and sarcasm rip open the secrecy that has shrouded the family and offers a powerful case for religious education.

Transparency, the show suggests, is not something we can achieve on our own. To see ourselves as we really are we need an external mirror. To change who we are we need support, compassion, and guidance. Religion—in this series a moral tradition as well as a way of knowing the divine—is offered as a possible source for this self-reflection and transformation. This makes *Transparent* one of the least cynical, most convincing shows about religion that’s offered on television.

*The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University and is codirector of the Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice.*



by Carol Howard Merritt

# CHURCH in the MAKING

## Going smaller and deeper

When one looks at a classic painting of an idyllic town, it's usually not difficult to spot the church. The steeple pierces the sky and soars above the homes and other buildings.

It isn't just the architecture that has set the church apart. We have attended church on Sunday, offering up the first hours of the week. We have dressed up, making sure that our children are scrubbed and shiny. All of these things have allowed us to bring our best selves before God—our first fruits to that sacred space.

But when Jeff Richards imagines a church in downtown Sacramento, California, he describes a different scene. The church doesn't tower over the other buildings; instead, it inhabits them. For Richards, church should not be segregated by a certain hour, enfolded by four walls. God should not have a house, where we call upon the divine presence once a week, fulfilling some duty, like visiting an ailing aunt. Instead, church should infuse our whole lives, seeping into every place we breathe and influencing everything we do.

As an evangelist for the Presbytery of Sacramento, Richards started the WordHouse, aiming to dismantle the things that separate church from the rest of our lives. The WordHouse meets in houses, pubs, and coffee-houses. People seek to make worship, fellowship, mission,

and discipleship integrated, not segmented, activities.

Worship takes place in a living room or a public space and begins with people checking in with one another. "People are pretty open about their struggles and pain," Richards said. They may talk about a divorce or a work situation, topics they might have kept quiet about in a traditional church.

Then they look at scripture. Richards invites everyone to discern what the text is saying. People ask questions, trying to understand the history and the characters, and then move to wondering how the text might apply to their lives. "How do we see ourselves in God's world?" "How are we are part of God's story?"

Once a month, the WordHouse hosts a potluck, and Richards begins it with an invitation to the table. "The Lord's Table is celebrated as a literal meal together. Not just a representation through a bite and sip," Richards explained.

When it comes to fellowship, the community doesn't hold a coffee hour, where people mingle with disposable cups in a church basement. Instead, they go out together, talk in pubs, drink good coffee, and hang out downtown.

Likewise, their mission takes place with organizations that already exist in the neigh-

borhood. They seek places where God is already at work. Many people involved with the WordHouse work with children who have limited resources. They also go out to the streets and share hot drinks with people who are experiencing homelessness. They have hosted Christmas parties for families who don't have homes.

Discipleship is a key ingredient of the WordHouse. For Richards, discipleship is "sharing what's going on in your life, with an element of how it relates to God." It's also "socializing and connecting with people and sharing God's love to see if they want to join you on this journey of knowing that God is with them."

Beyond this highly relational definition of discipleship, Richards has an expansive vision of a network of disciples: people from the initial group starting other groups, and those groups starting others.

The WordHouse represents a trend away from the "bigger is better" mentality and toward smaller, deeper community. We see this trend when consumers move from patronizing big-box stores to supporting farmer's markets and microbreweries. People who long for a spiritual life are shifting from the slickly programmed, performance-

centered megachurches they grew up in to small, intense, and highly relational communities. As one of thousands at a megachurch, it can be difficult to have much of an opinion about the larger direction of the church. But at the WordHouse, the participants are part of creating each service and the vision of the ministry.

Are these communities sustainable without traditional structures? When I asked Richards if the WordHouse planned to get a building and become a "big church," he laughed and said that wasn't a part of the plan. When there are more groups, he could imagine them needing a bigger space so that they could meet together, but that could be done at an existing church. Buildings often outlast their usefulness, and churches sometimes exist to maintain bricks and mortar rather than ministry.

But do the structures provide a sort of permanence that the practice of meeting in homes cannot? These questions will be answered in time. For now, Richards says, "we don't want to be in a separate building where God lives. There's an embodiment of the gospel that can be missed if we don't see our whole life as a place where God is in our midst."

*Carol Howard Merritt's Church in the Making appears in every other issue.*



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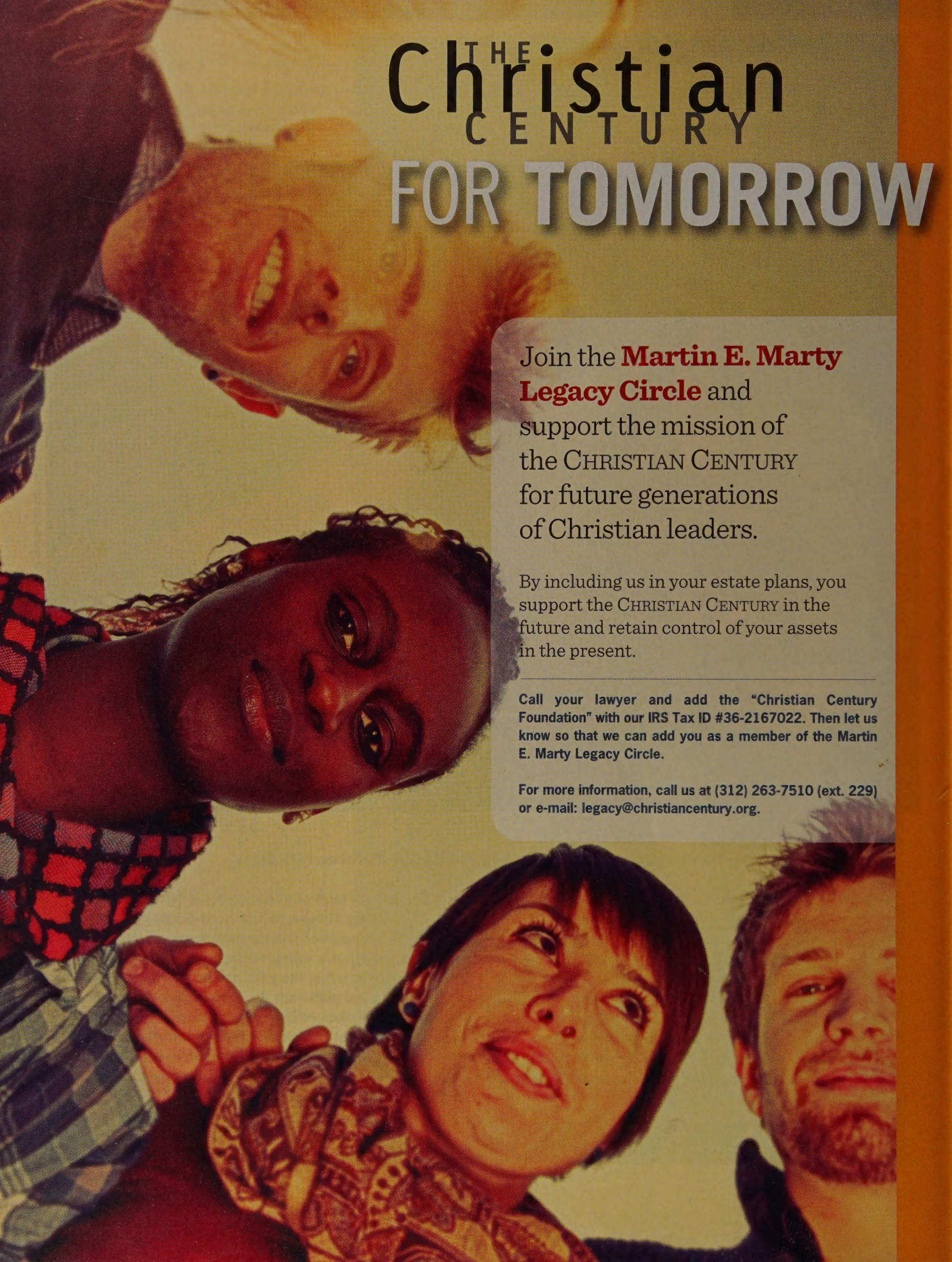
*Doubting Thomas, by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi da, 1571–1610)*

Caravaggio's painting depicts the story of the apostle's incredulity the way most of us remember it, but not exactly the way it is presented in John 20:27–28. In the narrative Jesus invites Thomas to "put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." But the narrator does not state that Thomas actually did what Christ invited him to do; rather, Thomas responds with a confession: "My Lord and my God!" Caravaggio, however, graphically displays Thomas's forefinger entering the gash in Christ's side. Christ guides Thomas's fingers into the wound with his left hand, while his right hand pulls back the drapery that covers his chest. Christ's calm expression contrasts with the intense and surprised reactions of Thomas and the other two disciples (the figure on the left is most likely Peter). The dramatic tenebrist light further accentuates the moment in which Thomas encounters the bodily wounds of the risen Christ. Caravaggio's figures, painted in earth tones, are not glorified but are representative of the common man. This scene is a favorite of all those who "have not seen but yet believe."

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*Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in the school's religion department.*





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